AN ARGUS SPECIALIST PUBLICATION

SKELETON CREW

PORTRAITS OF HORROR

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SWAMP THING

BRIAN LUMLEY
Grotesque fiction

MONSTER CLUBMAN
Profile of Chetwynd-Hayes
Plus a new short story

STEPHEN GALLAGHER
Timely TV

PLUS
Splatterpunk Lives
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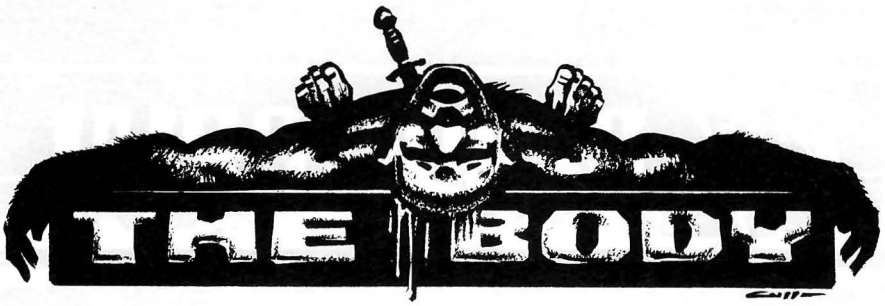

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SKELETON CREW

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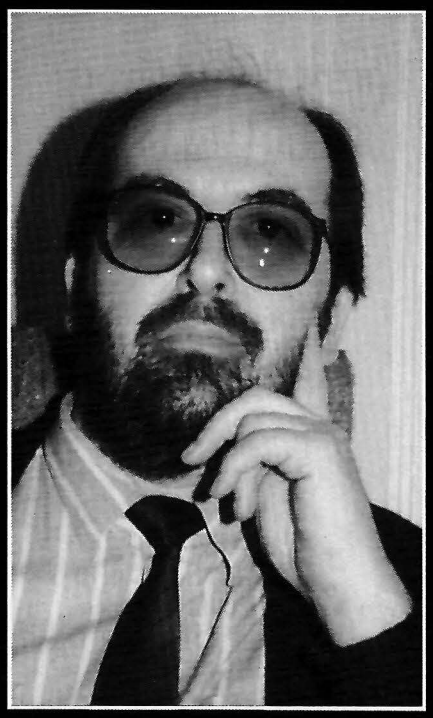
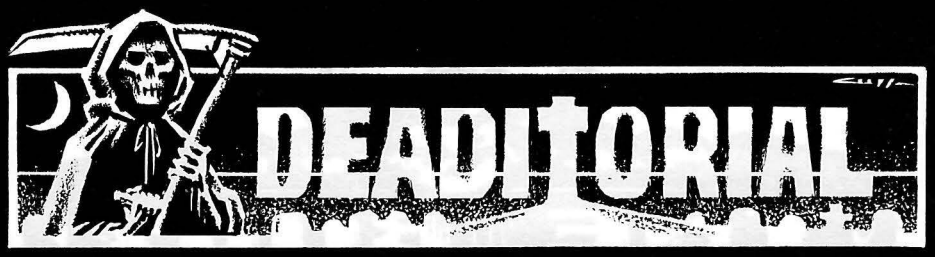
AN ARGUS SPECIALIST PUBLICATION



A new editor, a new era. What goes on around here? Dave Reeder sets the scene and eases SKELETON CREW to new beginnings.



What do you mean by real horror? And I stress *real* because I don't want to insult the genre by including mishandled archetypal figures rising and writhing from the vacuous mists of a hack's brain into yet another repackaged form, nor yet the products of one more studiously fashionable sensibility that recasts our darker moments into media packages, nor even the half-blind pleadings of interest groups trying to hijack the name to encompass their own tunnel vision of anti-reality.

No, I mean real panic. Real gut-wrenching stuff. Real horror.

Like having to produce this issue of SKELETON CREW from a standing start inside seven days. Say what? Yes, if you hadn't already heard, Dave (launch editor) Hughes has departed to greener fields.

So now what? Well, please allow me to introduce myself — the name may ring a few bells if you cast your mind back to HALLS OF HORROR (relaunch editor), WARRIOR (deputy editor), FANTASY MACABRE (editor), BFS NEWSLETTER (editor), SHOCK XPRESS (editor) and so on and so on. That background, plus the occasional carefully bought drink for a grateful professional writer, means that we start SKELETON CREW'S third phase with a lot of good friends. Some you see in this issue; a lot more you'll see in next.

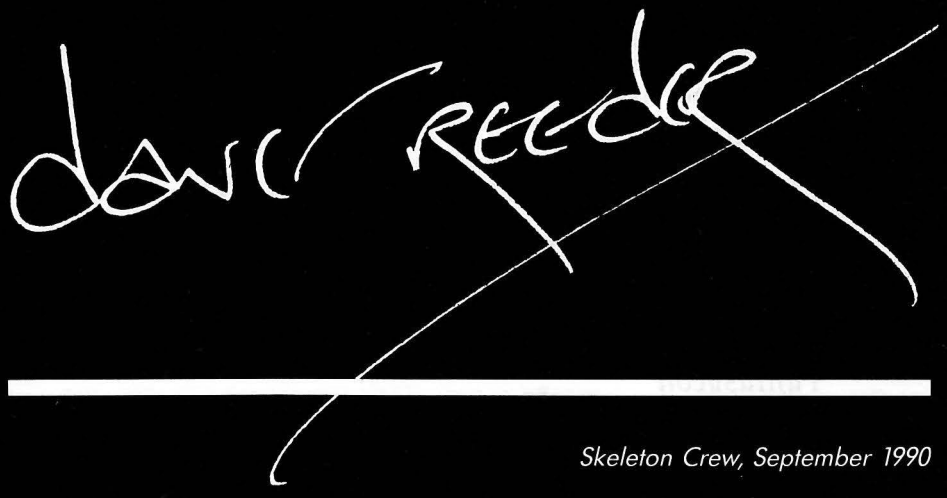
That said, however, over the forthcoming months you'll notice a dramatic shift from who-you-know to what-you-know. In an ever more crowded market, the only way forward for this magazine is to stand out from the crowd. And we'll do that by taking the whole world of horror very seriously indeed. So (for example) look for full bibliographies of favoured writers, detailed credits on film reviews, art portfolios planned as showcases for talent, and above all, informed comment from established writers and from newcomers.

In fact, our desire to see fresh talent (with more emphasis on the talent than the freshness) is the continuing thread that links the first two newstand issues to this one and onward. That's important because, too often, the horror market is portrayed as a series of inward-looking cliques where those in the know sit around and plot further projects to help each other and exclude the rest. Nothing could be further from reality. Two things unite the horror professionals in the country (and elsewhere, of course) — firstly, an abiding love for the genre and, secondly, a desire to support real talent and enthusiasm.

The shame of the genre is that, too often for comfort, enthusiasm masks a lack of talent and the generous professionals are taken advantage of (again). The hope for the genre is that, even knowing that reality, the professional will be as generous the next time.

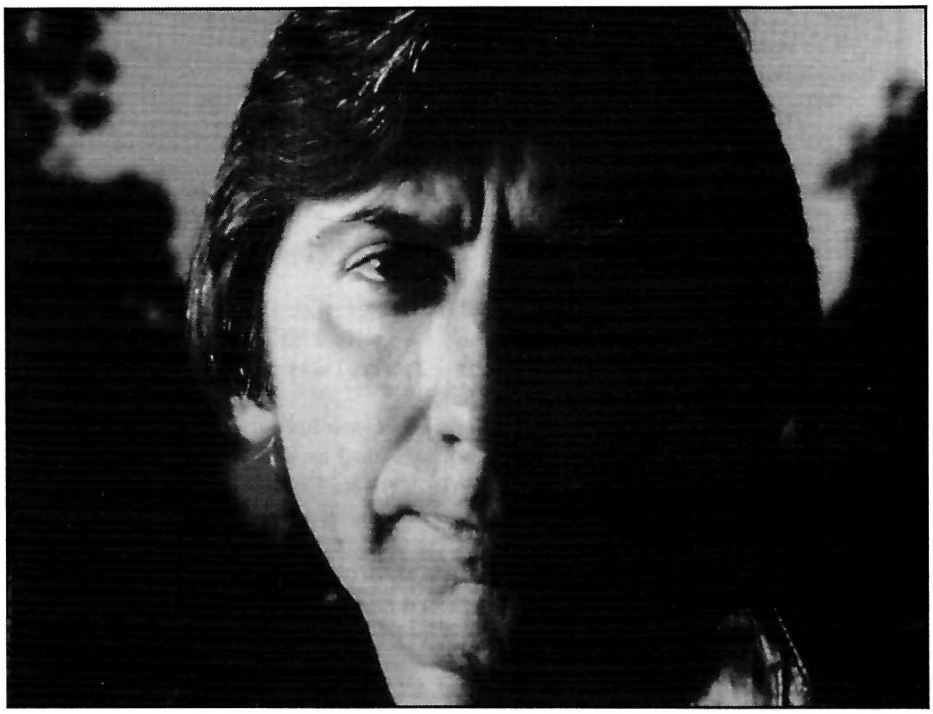
My pledge is that SKELETON CREW will not let them down. Because, to do so, would in the end be to kill the thing we love. Which sounds like another example of real horror to me and where we came in, I think.

Until next month.



Dead Write

James Herbert, best-selling novelist, rarely writes short pieces. That makes his thoughts on our green cover star doubly welcome.



Speaking of Hulks and Heaps and other Things

Me? I was reared on comic books. Before the age of ten I'd had the rare privilege in England of reading all those early DC and EC titles: TALES FROM THE CRYPT, FRANKENSTEIN, BATMAN, SUPERMAN, et al. American comics. Full colour! How I got hold of such a rare commodity at that time isn't relevant here (and I'm not sure I want to tell) but, suffice to say, the art of comics was my joy in those most formative of formative years.

Naturally enough, I grew out of them. The plots had become repetitive and ridiculous, the characters cardboard, the intent too solid, without subtlety. Of course, they hadn't degenerated; my mind was just looking towards the challenge of the more perceptive unillustrated word. As I said, natural enough. Comic books had become too juvenile, too stagnant. I was lost to them — or vice versa, however you see it.

Until recently, that is.

The name Alan Moore was coming up in conversation quite a lot. A writer of distinction, it was said. Then someone gave me a few copies of THE SAGA OF SWAMP THING. "See if you like 'em."

Like them? Indeed I did. Here was someone who was finally leading the comic book towards its true potential with insightful scripts and excellent art direction, pushing through those hazed peripheries of the imagination with stories that were not just literate, but — and I don't use the word lightly — inspired. Let's say I was somewhat impressed.

SWAMP THING is no quick, satisfying read. No, it's much more than that. The stories give cause for thought and then further, deeper thought long after you've laid them aside. Now that's some achievement in this field. This is no INCREDIBLE HULK or THE HEAP (remember THE HEAP?!!). SWAMP THING isn't a man transformed, but a dying man's consciousness, his psyche' absorbed through circumstances and environment of his death. Now that's heavy stuff, but when you take the mental leap it makes perfect and fascinating sense.

And once you decide to be swept along by Alan Moore's fertile imagination (helped along by some excellently succinct prose), then there's no turning back. You're hooked.

Me? I'm glad to be back on that hook.

"Now that's heavy stuff, but when you take the mental leap it makes perfect and fascinating sense."

Brian Lumley describes this new short story as 'a little different'. But of course. His writing career has been based on a continual pushing back of the limits of his audiences' expectations.

Grotesques Before Nine

The first horror story writer, seeing the second was stirring and the commencement of a grimacing yawn, said: "Good morning. And did you sleep well?"

The second horror story writer completed his yawn, opened his eyes wide and blinked hugely, and rubbed sleep out of them, before answering. "Not very."

"What?" the first feigned surprise, though he was hardly that. Indeed he envied the other; himself, he hadn't slept a wink all night! "Despite yestereve's splendid repast?"

"Probably because of it," said the second. And: "Is there coffee? I'm never best before coffee."

"I hadn't thought of it!" the first answered. "Let's see if they do room service." They did and coffee, steaming, was duly delivered.

While they sipped, the second horror story writer said: "So, here we are."

"Indeed," answered the first. "Here we are. And with a little time — some, anyway — on our hands, so to speak. Before you came awake, I was passing some of it in listing a few of the stories I haven't yet written."

"Oh?" the other raised his eyebrows. "How can you list what isn't yet written?"

"Ah, well," said the first, who on occasion affected an *arty* manner. "they're not unknown to me merely because they remain unwritten; I know them well enow; they are not committed to paper because there seemed so little prospect of publication."

"Stories, all thought out, clearly delineated — if only in your mind — and you haven't yet written them?" The second horror story writer seemed astonished. "I never knew you were doing so well; that you could afford *not* to write good tales! Except . . . maybe they weren't so hot, eh? Not fit for publication, you say, these tales?"

The first cocked his head on one side "Tales," he said, frowning, as if only half-decided, tasting the word and giving it his best consideration. And again: "Tales . . . Well, I suppose they are. But more *grotesques*, really. As to their fitness: what is unseemly today is often state-of-the-art tomorrow."

"I'll grant you that," the second horror story writer shrugged. "Mythos, fairy tales, gore, Dark Fantasy, dragons — they never seem to know what they want next! But grotesques? Do you mean prose poems? *Vignettes?* The word suggests slight pieces. What of these little tales, then — these little twisted tales — which you've not yet written?"

"Let us say tales with a twist in *their* tails, eh?" the first grinned, which showed remarkable spirit in the circumstances. "What of them? Why, simply that I'd like to tell a few — perhaps to you."

It was the other's turn to grin. "You're not afraid I'll steal your ideas? After all we've been ripped off before, you and I! Don't you wish to insert a little (c) before you commence?"

"My friend," answered the first, "right now I trust you above all men never to repeat the 'little' tales I'm going to tell you. But, if only to lend the conversation flow, what I suggest is this: that you in your turn regale me with a few of your own untold wonders. For after all, I'm surely not alone in this respect."

Again the other shrugged. "I've a tale or two," he said. "Or a grotesque, as you seem to prefer."

"Untold?"

A nod. "And for the selfsame reasons. Or . . . perhaps for other reasons, too. Maybe I heard them elsewhere. I'd hate to find myself accused of plagiarism — so late in the day, as it were."

Gravely, the first horror story writer said, "I shall not accuse you. And in my case, there is nothing new in heaven or earth." He curled his lip a little. "Or so my critics have frequently delighted in telling me!"

"You begin then," said the other, "since you've obviously been giving it some thought. And I'll have time to get my own thoughts in order."

"I'll need to build up to it," said the first. "Find my way. Discover your degree of tolerance."

The other raised his eyebrows more yet. "These grotesques of yours are too terrible to tell? My friend, don't concern yourself for my sake! My nerves can take it, I assure

you. Right now they can take almost anything."

"Perhaps they *are* too terrible to tell," the first shrugged, helplessly. "I don't know. I can only watch your reaction. When — if — I discover you wincing, then I'll know I go too far. For instance: how do you react to the plight of the deaf nute who falls down a well — and wears his hands to tatters clapping for help!?"

The second horror story writer said nothing for a while. Then: "Is that it?" he said. "A sick joke?" But in another moment he held up his hand. "No — wait — I see its nuances, its hints, its subtlety."

"You do?" The first was relieved.

"Ah, yes! At first I asked myself: why deaf? Mute would surely suffice. But then it dawned on me: if he's also deaf he won't know how hard he claps! And so, determined to be heard, he claps his hands to the bone — following which, because his legs are tired, and having nothing else left to swim with, he sinks! Yes, it's really quite clever. You should have written it into a story. But now at least I see what you mean by 'grotesques'! Except . . . I don't think I'm up to it."

The first was disappointed.

"No, wait!" said the second, again. "If it's sick jokes you're after, how about this one? Now tell me: how do you teach a spastic to ride a bicycle?"

The first horror story writer shook his head.

"By welding his leg-iron to the pedal," said the other, without a chuckle.

"That," said the first, after a moment's pause, "*is* merely a sick joke! But at least you're getting in the mood of the thing. Now try this for size:

"In a near-future world, a man tired of the infidelity of human females buys from Universal Robots Inc. an expensive android decked out like a complete and completely gorgeous woman. She performs *exactly* like a real woman: cooks, keeps house, even answers him back — but ever in ways calculated to please his male ego — and of course is the perfect bedmate. Naturally, theirs is a childless union (but he hates kids anyway) which lasts for several years. Then . . . he discovers that he's a cuckold! And he discovers it in the worst possible way: he goes down with a dose!

"But . . . how can this be? How *can* it be? She is programmed only to him, will react to no other's word, no other's touch.

"The answer in the end is simple. In a rage he disassembles her down to the last shred of synthetic skin, the last small nut and bolt — and then hurries over to Universal Robots Inc. and dismembers the maintenance mechanic *who last 'serviced' her!"*

"Excellent!" said the second horror story writer. "Though it's not really a horror. But with slight improvements — "

"Eh?"

"But certainly" He dismembers the maintenance mechanic *also* down to the last nut and bolt! Now think about it . . . and how's *that* for subtlety?"

The first scratched his head. "Damn me if you're not right. God, I should have written it!"

"This," said the other, "is a good game. And now that we're into it I feel quite inspired. There's a story I've wanted to tell for years, but like yours it has indelicate —"

"To hell with indelicacies!" the first threw wide his arms.

"Out with it!"

"Do we have time?"

The first glanced at the light flooding their window, the dusty sunbeams striking through, then at his watch in something of concern. But "Yes," he sighed. "I think so. One more from you, and another from me, and we're through."

"Very well," said the second horror story writer. And he commenced:

"My story is set in the present. A doctor specializing in these selfsame 'social' complaints retires from his Harley Street clinic to the seclusion of a large country house, there hoping to carry on his studies at a more leisurely pace and at the same time see a lot more of the young wife he has taken in his latter years.

"He is, our doctor, strikingly humanitarian: it disgusts him that the noble Human Race is bedevilled, hag-ridden, by the spread of diseases in the main *brought about* by its very humanity, which at best is faulted. He is affronted by the thought that disease — certainly the great majority of the more deadly human diseases — is bred *in* us and passed on one to another like . . . like fleas from one kitten to the next. It disturbs him that we *ourselves* are the breeding ground for such killers.

"An Asian coughs in a Singapore street. A tourist turns his face away — too late! And six months later in Europe the same tourist loses a lung. In Hong Kong the body of a man is found floating in the harbour. The corpse *seethes* and is quickly buried in a lead-lined coffin! — but what of those who touched him? Horrors have come out of Korea and Vietnam to which there is still no positive answer. Ah, yes; you would be correct to suspect that the unmentionable AIDS is but one in a select but growing fraternity of gross disturbances for our beneficent doctor.

"For instance: how do you react to the plight of the deaf mute who falls down a well — and wears his hand to tatters clapping for help!?"

"And then, out of the blue, he discovers he is not the only one born to serve mankind. This is a self-evident fact, of course, but he had not known there was another so close to him. For now it appears his young wife (though at a somewhat lower level) is similarly inclined toward the service of man. Almost *any* man!

"From his attic laboratory through the lenses of powerful binoculars, he watches her lascivious cavortings in the countryside around with neighbours, tradesmen, even servants, and he reflects upon those long late hours spent in his clinic in the city, over which she never once complained. And he is stupefied into a dull lethargy, a lassitude out of which, finally, her very worst indiscretion violently discharges him.

"Namely, he sees her having it off with his best friend, a much younger doctor, once his student! And how often has he wondered at this young man's attachment to him, considering himself fortunate to be the focus of such faith and, indeed, fanaticism?

"And what price humanitarianism now? Humanitarianism? Out the window with you!

"His wife has periodic migraines (handy for her, in the past), the which he has always cured with a jab of some patent pain— killer. When next she develops the well known symptoms he jabs her again — but with an entirely different brew . . .

"The Institute of Oriental Diseases is much disturbed when, some months later, they receive the good doctor's letter. He thanks them for the sample batch of frozen bacillus they sent him a year ago, but at the same time warns them against its positively self-propagating contractual properties! Evidently a strain of this pathogenic organism has escaped from his laboratory: his wife has been infected! Of course he is the only one who can possibly treat her and mercifully he has the facilities to hand. He placed his house 'Out of Bounds' while he busies himself with her cure.

"Ah, but in reality, there is no cure and, even if there were, he would not apply it! And she, poor woman, fully believing through all of this that she has been infected by an escaped bacillus — *and* wondering if she has passed it on!

"Certainly she has, but her husband knows that transmitted in the usual way it will take a little time to develop. It *is* developing at this very moment, in the body of the younger man; but she may not contact him — not even by telephone — for her husband is keeping her in a 'controlled environment'. 'Only fail, in whatever slightest degree, to observe my instructions.' (he tells her) 'and I shall not be held responsible.'

"Confined to her sickbed, she longs to be able to see her lover, to warn him against the thing which is rapidly destroying her — but her husband has told her that to leave the 'clinically sterile atmosphere' of her room even for a single moment would be to jeopardize her life. Her life? — it is finished! — but she doesn't know that. She thinks her husband is trying to save it, while in fact he gloats as the horror's symptoms wax in her and make themselves ever more evident.

"Its symptoms, yes . . .

"The lack of muscular control; the falling hair, sunken eyes, general pallor and debility. The sores in the corners of the eyes, in the mouth and in . . . other departments. The shrivelling of sinuses, loss of mental stability, collapse of tissue and of the nose . . . The gibbering . . . The rotting of ligaments and sutures, especially of the skull . . . The stench!

"In her last week, finally he puts a telephone beside her bed, and in a lucid moment she contacts her lover. So far gone that she makes little sense, nevertheless something of the import of what she says gets through to him. He contacts her husband — but tentatively, on matters of mutual interest — and is invited to go and see him. During the course of their conversation, he politely asks after his ex-mentor's good lady: strange that she is not here to greet him, as of old? Gravely, he is advised not to inquire. Sadly, he is informed that it is 'just a matter of time'. But despite the good doctor's assumed reticence, when this horrified young man asks the nature of her illness — why, of course he learns that, too. The escaped bacillus! And when he learns the nature of *that* monstrosity . . .

"'But . . . then you're also treating yourself!' the young man (let's call him John Flanders) cries.

"'Eh?' says the good doctor. 'How so? Ah! I see your meaning John . . . but no, for love's last arrow was shot from this old bow a long time ago. Recently — *until* recently — I kissed her hand once or twice. Nothing more.'

"'But . . . there is — must be — something you can do?'

"'Alas, no. If there were, don't you think I'd be doing it?'

"'But . . . if Gladys has it, perhaps others have been infected! You have many visitors here — '

"'Not since its onset, no.'

"'My God! My God!' And the young man hurries off and immediately treats himself to a full measure of tests and examinations — all of which prove positive!

"He phones the good doctor: 'I have it! Out of curiosity I tested myself! I cannot be mistaken!'

"'Impossible! You *are* mistaken. This thing is singularly rare. Her plight has acted morbidly upon you. You are imagining it. Your fever is all of the mind. Take an Aspro and a sleeping draft and get a good night's sleep. I'm burying Gladys tomorrow and may not concern myself with hysterical and entirely imaginary maladies now. If you're still worried tomorrow, come and see me then — but in the evening.'

"And John Flanders *is* worried in the morning and he *does* go to see him that evening — only to discover that the good doctor is not at home! The one real expert in his field and he has left the country! A long trip abroad, touring, in order that he may adjust to his loss . . .

"Six months go by.

"The good (bad?) doctor has grown tired of flitting here and there across the world. Having finally outdistanced his conscience to his satisfaction, now he has taken a villa on a small Greek island. One morning, sitting in his garden with a pot of fresh coffee and looking down through his faithful binoculars on the whitewashed town and the impossibly blue sea, he spies a lone figure toiling up the long, stony path towards his gate.

"There is something about this figure. It does not seem old, but yet it wobbles a little this way and that. Maybe he (whoever 'he' is) is drunk? Or perhaps feeling the sun, which is pounding on the land with ninety degree hammerblows. The doctor's binoculars won't focus, but in any case the newcomer's hat is pulled down too low over his eyes. And why, pray, is the man muffled like that, on a day like this?

"Something — some spasm of alarm, some cracked chime of foreboding — propels the doctor to his rooms, where he tremblingly throws off his dressing-gown and puts on slacks and a cool shirt. And no sooner dressed than he hears the stranger's shuffling footsteps coming up the garden. The doctor hurries to his door — where already an unwelcome shadow looms large!

"And as the doctor backs off, collapsing into a chair, so the stranger — who is no longer a stranger, but nevertheless strange — enters and approaches, and finally stands over him. But . . . It cannot be! By now he should be — *must* be — dead!

"Well, not quite — but very nearly.

"'John!' the doctor gags and gurgles. 'John Flanders!' For he can't find other words to say.

"'At . . . *urk-ag!* . . . your . . . uh-*arggghl* . . . service!" the other chokes from a throat full of froth, phlegm and bile. He doffs his hat — but the top of his head is glued to the lining of the hat with congealed pus!

"There issues a soft tearing sound as the skull's sutures part and the dome of the skull, still in the hat, is tugged free! And as the gape-mouthed doctor feels upon his face the splash of lethal juices, so he sees Flanders' frothing, naked brain and the mad glare in his yellow, seething eyes . . . !"

After a moment: "Bravo!" said the first horror story writer, and at once held up his hand. "But . . . with reservations. For I agree with your earlier statement, about not wanting to be labelled a plagiarist? My friend, I fear that something much like it has been done before."

The other shrugged. "I thought so. Possibly that's why I didn't do it. But in any case, it could never have been used. I won't cry any tears over it. It is possibly the nastiest thing I ever thought of . . . "

"Oh?" said the first horror story writer, narrowing his eyes a little, perhaps with a hint of premature satisfaction, even triumph. "So you've never dreamed up anything worse than that, eh?"

The other eyed him speculatively, then knowingly and finally nodded. "And at last your motive for all of this becomes clear. Devious devil! You wanted to tell me your very worst horror story, right? So why didn't you say so right from the beginning? But is there time left?"

His colleague glanced at his watch. "Perhaps, if we waste no more of it."

"Out with it, then," sighed the second horror story writer. "I won't stop up my ears."

And this is the story the first horror story writer told:

"There was this travelling salesman called Charlie Quinn. He was up north in Scotland in a wild part of the country. Mind you, you don't have to be far outside a town in Scotland and it's pretty soon wild! Work all done for the day — and very profitably, thank you — he started back for Edinburgh in his old jalopy. But he'd left it late and it got dark quickly and then it started snowing — with a vengeance! Well, when it snows up there it really snows. So Quinn put his foot down a bit, as much as he dared in the conditions, and kept his eyes skinned for an inn or a convenient pub. Anything is better than being caught out on an open road in a blizzard. And Quinn's battery wasn't too hot, and his lamps were on the flickery side . . . things were a bit dodgy.

"Well, just how it happened we'll never know, but somehow Quinn took a wrong turn and ended up in a little valley between two spurs of the Pentland Hills. And by then the snow was piling up thick and fast, and his wipers were starting to stick, and

"The lack of muscular control; the falling hair, sunken eyes, general pallor and debility. The sores in the corners of the eyes, in the mouth and in . . . other departments."

he was beginning to panic just a little.

"He knew he'd gone wrong and turned the car round, but the snow had filled a ditch and he didn't see it; the back wheels slid in and stuck there; cursing his luck, he switched off, got out of the car and had a look. And while he's checking for damage and trying to figure out how to get back on the road, so he sees a light flickering some little way off in a copse of trees where they're etched black against the white and blurry-grey hills.

"Now, the way he figures it is like this:

"Even if he does free the car, still he's got to find his way back to the main road, and from there into the city. And he has a way to go yet. By now the roads are probably blocked, and the sky's still black with snow. But just a quarter-mile across the field there's this friendly little light, and doubtless a warm fire and pot of soup. So —

" — He gets a blanket off the back seat, secures the car, turns up his collar and starts out for the copse on the other side of the field. Over the fence he goes and through the hedge, and straight into drifts right up to his thighs! And what a hell of a job he has then — so that it takes him all of forty minutes just to battle his way to the wood and find the path that leads to the cottage! Except 'cottage' maybe isn't the right word for it; 'hovel' mightn't be too picturesque and anyway paints a truer picture.

"Well, by now Charlie Quinn is just about all in: cold, aching like death from the neck down and frozen from there up. His ears and nose are numb; he's half deaf and blind from the howling, whipping snow; even a hovel has to be heaven on a night like this. And there at the end of the path is this old ruin of a place, with a single light shining out through its single grimy window.

"Up to the door staggers Charlie Quinn and bangs on it for all he's worth. And at once there's something of movement inside, in a little while the door opens a fraction and there's this wizened old face in the gap, peering out at him. 'Aye?' shouts the owner of that face. 'Is there something?' Which strikes Quinn as a bloody silly question!

"'Let me in!' he gasps. 'I'm done for. Car's broken down. Stuck for the night . . .'

"'Is that so, laddie?' says the other, and Quinn sees the heavy chain holding that stout old door firmly in place. 'Well, noo, an' it seem ye're oot' o'luck! See, this is a private house, it's no hostelry. But just four miles east o' here there's the Five Barrels, if that's a help.' And he slams the door shut in Quinn's face.

"The Five Barrels? An inn; Quinn had seen it earlier in the day when he drove out. But . . . four miles? Forget it! Again he hammers at the door, more desperately now and this time when it opens its regulation crack the old man has a shotgun in his hands. 'Hard o' hearin, are ye?' he says.

"'Man, I'll *die* out here!' Quinn shouts over the storm's howl.

"'Verra likely,' the other nods. 'An' sooner than ye think if ye come disturbin' a man again!' And once more he goes to shut the door.

"Quinn sticks his foot in the gap. 'No, wait!' he pleads 'I have money.'

"A rattle of chains and the doors opens more yet, and Quinn stumbles inside. He's in a small hallway leading to the main room proper; but the door to that is still closed, and his 'host' still holds the shotgun on him. 'Money, is it?' he says, the folds of wrinkles around his narrowed eyes smoothing out a little.

"And Quinn fumbles out a wet Fiver from his pocket. 'Will this be enough? I only want a roof over my head for the night, that's all.'

"'Well — ' says the other, scratching his head.

"'For pity's sake!' says Quinn.

"'Pity?' the oldster grins and shakes his head. 'No much o' that aroon here! At least, Ah have'nae found a deal. But a roof? Ah can supply that, right enough, if ye're no fussy.'

"'Oh, no!' Quinn is emphatic. 'Fussy? Not a bit of it! This will be fine.'

"'This?' says the greypate. 'Ma hoose, d'ye mean?' He shakes his head. 'No, no laddie — not ma hoose. Ah'm a verra private man an' cannae have a guest in ma hoose. But there's a wee barn roun' the back, an ' — '

"'A barn?' Quinn cuts him short, his heart sinking. 'But . . . is it dry, warm? Will it provide shelter?'

"'It's a *verra* sturdy wee barn!' says the other. 'Straw for a bed, stout walls an' a tight roof. So it is yes or no?'

Quinn has no choice. 'I suppose it's yes,' he mumbles, but sourly. 'Will you show me the way?'

"'No so fast, laddie,' says the other. 'See, there's a wee something Ah shid mention first.'

"'Oh?' (What now? Quinn wonders.)

"'See, ye'll no be on ye're own in there.'

"'Eh?' Quinn frowns. 'Animals, do you mean?'

"'No beasts, no. Ah keep them in another place across the hill. A woman!"

"'A woman' Quinn begins to doubt the old lad's sanity. 'In a barn?'

"The other nods. 'It was an act o' kindness. A Glasgie lass, Ah fancy. She came wanderin' this way a month ago, before the bad weather came doon. Not altogether there, ye ken? Came out o' one 'o they hoosies o' ill repute in Glasgie. Ah, but sick — *verra* sick! In the head, an' probably in the body, too.'

"'But . . . is she mad, dangerous?' Quinn's heart sinks further yet.

"'Dangerous? Lord no! A bit queer in the head, that's all — an' wicked o' course, as all such are.'

"'But you've informed the police, a doctor?'

"'Ah minds mah business!' the oldster snapped. 'An' so shid you! She's in there an' that's that. An' Ah ken she lives, for Ah put down scraps for her an' she takes 'em — an' we've no wee rats so Ah ken it's the lassie.'

"'But — '

"'Ah've an early start tomorrow,' the other cut him short, 'an' need mah bed. So if ye're done wi' blatherin' — '

"With the gun, he ushers Quinn back out into the storm, which is really blowing up now; and round the back they go, to the barn. There's a heavy latch, which the old lad lifts to yank the barn door open. The wind is so strong it almost takes the door off him, but Quinn slips in and helps from the other side. Then . . . well at least he's in out of the blast, and the old man was right: the place is dry and warm. And dark . . .

"It has the not unpleasant smell which all barns have, of straw and cobwebs and maybe mice, of long-gone swallows and snuggling owls, and apples ripened and sold off months ago. And maybe just a whiff of some cheap perfume, too. The dark isn't absolute but close enough; Quinn's eyes slowly grow accustomed; in the closest corner he spies a small pyramid of bales. Unfolding his blanket, he moves carefully in that direction, and finds his feet gathering up loose straw. Then his knees hit a bale partly broken down, he stumbles and knocks over a leaning pitchfork, whose handle rattles down the boards of the wall and clatters to the floor.

"Outside the wind moans, while to Quinn it seems that the echoes of his clumsiness ring on and on, dinning in his cold ears and in the otherwise silence of the place. And on the other side of the dark bran the straw rustles as someone stirs.

"Quinn stands still a while — listens and thinks a few stray thoughts, lets faded pictures flicker across his mind's eye, of another old barn when he was a boy, and the girl he knew there — then shrugs and feels about, and piles himself a bed, on top of which he lies his blanket. Off with his damp jacket and trousers, and onto one half of the blanket, the other half pulled over him . . . when again he hears the sound of movement in the darkness. And this time, too a voice:

"'Mister? Are you there?' A girl's voice, small and husky and maybe a little uncertain. Perhaps afraid.

"'Don't worry about me, love,' says Quinn. 'I won't bother you if you don't bother me. My car's broke down and I'm only here for the night. Weathering out the storm, so to speak. I'll wish you good night.'

"There's no answer, just a sigh and the straw rustling a little. And Quinn thinks about what the old boy told him: that the girl's mind has gone, and how she's likely sick in the body, too. But after a while:

"'You sound a nice sort of man,' she says.

"'A nice *tired* sort of man,' he answers. 'I.m going to sleep now.'

"'You'll find the straw scratches a bit,' she says. 'You'd sleep better if you were more relaxed. If your body was eased a little — relieved a bit. You know?' And now there's that certain guttural tone Quinn has heard so often before, in as many different places. For after all, he has that sort of job.

"'Lovely,' he says, 'the old man told me about you. Now I don't mean to offend, but I'm a man who looks after his health. So if you — '

"But now she's broken out laughing! And Quinn wonders: *is she crazy? Or have I said something funny?*

"'Oh, that old story I told the old boy!" she laughs. And then, more seriously: 'Listen I'm on the run from my husband. He beat me up once too often. I can't go into Edinburgh to my folks because he'll be watching and waiting. So I'll just hang on here for a few days more and then I'm on my way. London — the bright lights — a bit of freedom!'

"It sounded logical. 'I wish you luck,' says Quinn. 'But now I —'

"'Of course,' she breaks in, 'the reason I worked there was because I like it, you know? I mean, I just . . . like it.'

"'And your husband beat you when he found out what you were doing?'

"'God, no! He knew what I was doing! He was my pimp *and* my husband! He beat me when he found out how much I liked it!'

"At this Quinn can't help but chuckle. And now he's starting to feel, well, interested. He takes out matches from his jacket pocket and considers lighting one. But . . . dang-

"There issues a soft tearing sound as the skull's sutures part and the dome of the skull, still in the hat, is tugged free! And as the gape-mouthed doctor feels upon his face the splash of lethal juices, so he sees Flanders' frothing, naked brain and the mad glare in his yellow, seething eyes . . .!"

"'Listen: I'm on the run from my husband. He beat me up once too often. I can't go into Edinburgh to my folks because he'll be watching and waiting. So I'll just hang on here for a few days more and then I'm on my way. London — the bright lights — a bit of freedom!'"

erous in here, with all this straw. And anyway, the matches are wet.

"'You're hardly a fast mover, are you?' she says.

"'Oh, I'm not so slow,' he answers, still undecided. But . . . just suppose the old boy is right? What if she is a little sick in the head and worse in the body? 'Now listen, lovey,' he finally continues. 'I mean, I'm not a coward but I am discreet, and — '

"'Why don't I do you a favour?' She says. And now that his eyes are just a little more accustomed, he sees this female figure stand up in the gloom, a dark smudge against the greater darkness. She stands up, slowly and sensuously peels off whatever it is she's wearing and sits down again on a bale of hay. And her silhouette now is a very sexy, very desirable one.

"'A . . . a favour?' says Quinn.

"'Do I need to draw you pictures? Don't you fancy a little blow job?'

"Quinn is only a man; he can be excited and disgusted at the same time. And he is. Disgusted at his excitement and excited by his disgust. But mainly excited. And as any man knows: once it's up it's hard to put down. 'I — ' he begins.

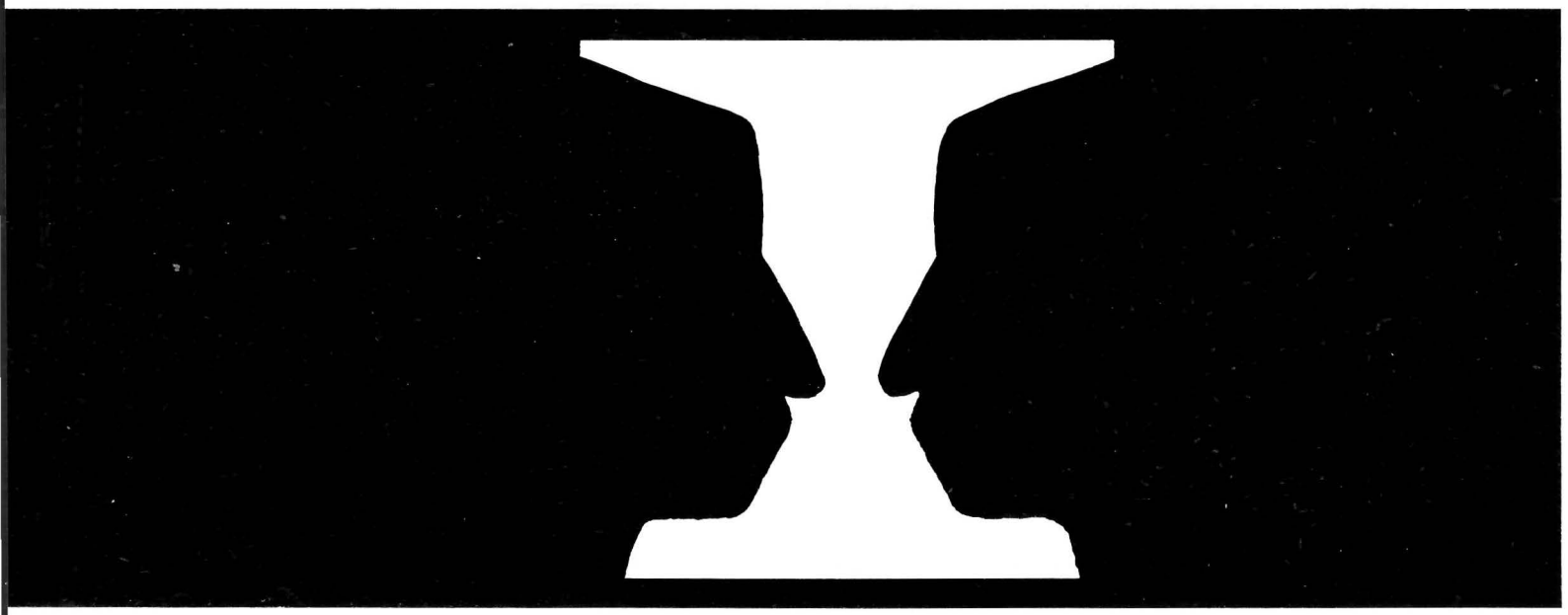
"'I give good head,' she assures him, her voice low and dirty.

"And getting to his feet, Quinn thinks to himself: *even if the worst is the worst, what can I catch off a blow job?*

"He moves towards her in the dark, catches up the straw on his feet again, and hits the same implement, before finally he gets there. And she catches him up and sighs, and then . . . and then . . .

"Quinn trembles, and shudders, and when she starts to slow down he grasps her head and works himself in and out. He's almost there — almost — when she says 'G-God — but that's *wonderful!*'

"And he stops, and thinks, and freezes into a sudden immobility. 'H-how come — ' he finally says, weak-kneed there in the dark, holding her head '— how come you can *talk* to me when . . . when you're giving me a blow job?'



"And, 'Ah!" she gurgles, as his hair suddenly stands on end and he jerks himself free of her. 'Ah, but that's not my mouth, *it's the hole where my nose used to be!*'"

. . . Eventually the second horror story writer said: "Grotesque! Indeed, gross!"

"Exactly!" replied the first, very satisfied with himself.

"But alas, the last we have time for."

Out in the corridor, slow footsteps sounded and keys rattled. "Five to nine," said the other. "And the last grotesque about to resolve itself."

"Eh?" replied the first. And: "Ah! Of course! The story so far:

"Two horror story writers discover that for twenty years their mutual publisher has been consistently ripping them off — but cruelly!"

"— So they inject him with a pint of printer's ink and feed him headfirst into his own presses!" the second finished it.

"Our one and only collaboration!" said the first.

"But the bastards caught us!" said the second.

Then . . . the cell door squealed open and they came for them.

As they left, with bowed heads, the *very* last grotesque lay printed by the morning sun on the floor of their empty cell: a gallows in silhouette, with the noose gently swaying . . .

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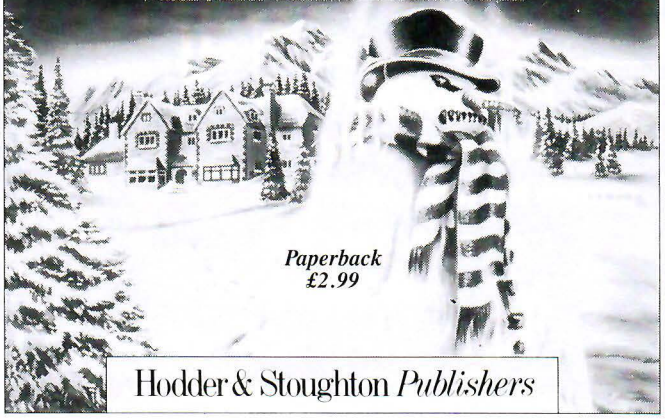

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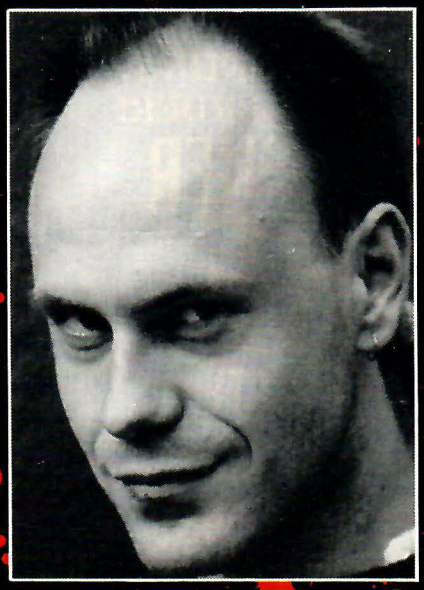

Philip Nutman's new alternate-monthly column comes from his alternate-monthly New York residence.

The Killing Note

It was recently announced in another genre publication that Splatterpunk was dead and public interest in explicit horror on the wain. This statement raised a few eyebrows and prompted some hysterical laughter from some writers and editors in the US.

Taken literally, the comment implies that John Skipp, Craig Spector, and David J. Schow (the 'power trio' of New Wave horror who invented and first used the term) are no longer with us.

If readers no longer have a passion for high amp, visceral horror, Shaun Hutson's ASSASSIN wouldn't have sold over 150,000 copies; Macdonald Futura wouldn't have published Schow's rock 'n' roll novel THE KILL RIFF in hardcover, or picked up the British rights to Nancy A. Collins' SUNGLASSES AFTER DARK; Onyx Books, a division of New American Library, would have pulped their entire line; Rex Miller's SLICE would still be looking for a publisher; and St. Martin's Press wouldn't have invested time and money in having Paul M. Sammon edit SPLATTERPUNKS!, a forthcoming hardcover anthology designed for inclusion on American college literary courses.

You get the picture.

There's more happening in addition to the books mentioned above. But we won't worry about them right now. The focus of this column — the first front line dispatch in a series of bimonthly opinionated news features — is to clear the air of some misunderstandings and to put some of the genre's current trends into perspective.

As the journalist who wrote the article which pushed the term 'Splatterpunk' into common usage (*Inside The New Horror*, TWILIGHT ZONE, August 1988), I've come under a lot of criticism from writers and readers alike and have seen a lot of other journalists misuse the expression. Since the article received little exposure in this country let's put the record straight once and for all.

Splatterpunk is not a literary movement. It is an *attitude* or, as Skipp once described it, "an angle of attack" designed to push the boundaries of contemporary horror fiction further than has been seen before. That doesn't mean purely in terms of explicitness; we're talking tabooist areas here.

Horror, director David Cronenberg has noted, is confrontational by its very nature. And as Stephen King once wrote, ". . .the great appeal of horror fiction through the ages is that it serves as a rehearsal for our own deaths." King, in his introduction to his NIGHT SHIFT collection, goes on about the desire to slow down and rubberneck at car accidents before making the above point, using them as illustrations before discussing the taboo of death.

In the complex world we live in there are more taboos than just death: in pre-glasnost Russia, freedom of speech was taboo — and, to a degree, still is; in America, freedom of expression has become tabooist — the MPAA have cracked down on explicitness in horror movies, the PRMC are still trying to censor popular music (the puritans would have us believe singing about sex and drugs will corrupt young minds) and so on.

You know this.

But up until a few years ago horror fiction was still mining the almost exhausted vein of supernatural terror, the thing half seen on the stair, manifestations of ancient evil. . . and so on. All well and good but as society changes so too do its tastes and, as a new generation of writers and readers reached their maturity, so has the genre. Whilst we had masterful works like Peter Straub's GHOST STORY and King's THE SHINING appear in the mid-to-late seventies — mature novels, for sure — where was horror that touched on contemporary fears such as urban alienation, moral bankruptcy, environmental issues and other day to day concerns? Going through its early adolescence, finding its own voice. And that voice is the 'New Horror', of which Splatterpunk was the first wave.

". . . what any conscientious writer does is try and tell a good story from a fresh perspective in their own voice."

CASSELL'S NEW ENGLISH DICTIONARY defines horror as, "dread of terror, mingled with detestation or abhorrence; that which excites terror or repulsion . . ." Horror fiction is usually defined in terms of the supernatural, but that's rather limiting. Since the field is so wide-ranging in its concerns, perhaps we should define it as any work which probes the dark side of existence. By this measure, books as diverse as Ruth Rendell's A DEMON IN MY VIEW, Conrad's HEART OF DARKNESS, Hardy's JUDE THE OBSCURE and Dostoyevsky's NOTES FROM UNDERGROUND would — and should — rub shoulders with THE RATS, SPAWN, 'SALEM'S LOT, THE DAMNATION GAME and THE LEGEND OF HELL HOUSE.

Since publishers and critics love to label and define, we can't just accept books as books anymore than we can people as people, regardless of skin colour, class or economic background. So if there has to be a handle for the post-war baby-boom generation of writers working within the field, let's call their writings 'New Horror'.

Of course, there is nothing really new under the sun, so what any conscientious writer does is try and tell a good story from a fresh perspective in their own voice. And with each generation the tone of that voice changes.

The epithet 'Splatterpunk' was coined by David Schow as an ironic, media-hip counterpart to 'Cyberpunk', the name author and editor Gardner Dozois bestowed on William Gibson, Bruce Sterling and the rest of science fiction's 'new wave' of the eighties. Craig Spector defines the term as "what happens when we push our own limits to the absolute maximum, to the red line, and dare to look at what lies in the territory we dare not cross." Taken literally, the term implies 'gory undesirables'.

Yes, a lot of new horror won't just ask you to imagine what colour the walls are, it will paint them red before your eyes. And overall it has bad table manners to boot. It is not a comfortable reading experience with reassuring answers, but survivalist fiction for the nineties that reflects the moral chaos of our times. But beneath its gruesome surface is an intelligence, an outlaw morality, and sometimes a tough humanitarian stance.

The new generation of writers grew up in the shadow of the atom bomb, rock 'n' roll, movies, TV, the failure of the peace and love generation and the in-your-face attitude of punk rock, not just the influence of Stephen King, Richard Matheson, H.P. Lovecraft and Edgar Allen Poe. The traditional red carpet of genre fiction was there but it wasn't the only furnishing in the house: Norman Bates was upstairs stuffing birds in his work room while Mother watched, young brother Michael (Myers) was watching NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD on TV in the dining room, the Sex Pistols (or, in Shaun Hutson's case, Iron Maiden) were playing on the stereo and Freddy Brady and Jason Hindley were on the front of the newspaper long before Wes Craven invented Ian Krueger or Sean Cunningham introduced the world to Myra Voorhees in FRIDAY THE 13TH.

The old ghosts are fading away like old soldiers; the new ghosts replacing them are global warming, drug abuse, incest, paedeophilia, dysfunctional families . . . you name it. To tackle these subjects the young generation of writers are using a more explicit visual vocabulary akin to the pyrotechnics of rock 'n' roll. But behind the cinematic, taboo-breaking dynamics is, in Skipp, Spector and Schow's case, an attempt to fuse the humanitarian idealism of the sixties with the amped-up, aggressive pragmatism of the eighties. As Skipp puts it, "I think our task as a species is to work out a moral ground that's solid and consistent with people's real lives. That involves taking apart the old systems to find out what works and what's horse flop. To find something that works in the face of increasingly complex and mad times is very high on the agenda."

As we move into increasingly violent times it's inevitable the books we read, the movies we see are going to become more brutal, either physically, emotionally or psychologically. Yet there's a risk of packaging the darkness in a candy coating. LETHAL WEAPON II, for example, made killing on a large scale clean, exciting and attractive, with Patsy Kensit's death providing Mel Gibson with an excuse to go apeshit as he takes on the bad guys. Real violence and the factors that cause it are never attractive and if horror is going to mature and continue to confront our fears it has a responsibility to be shocking; complacent escapism is a form of creative cancer.

"The idea is that a reader should pick up a horror novel and not know how far it's going to go. A lot of readers do feel bushwhacked by that element of surprise, but horror should — and must — punch nerves," opines Spector. "When we write this hideous horror stuff we're throwing the reality of the anatomy of violence in the reader's face. That should help the reader make those hard choices. By pushing the limits of our awareness, we're better equipped to make real choices."

"We are dealing with difficult subjects," Skipp has stated. "We are dealing with sexual brutality, the nature and ramifications of real flesh-and-blood violence."

"If readers no longer have a passion for high amp, visceral horror, Shaun Hutson's Assassin wouldn't have sold over 150,000 copies . . ."

To be continued/concluded in CREW 2/4

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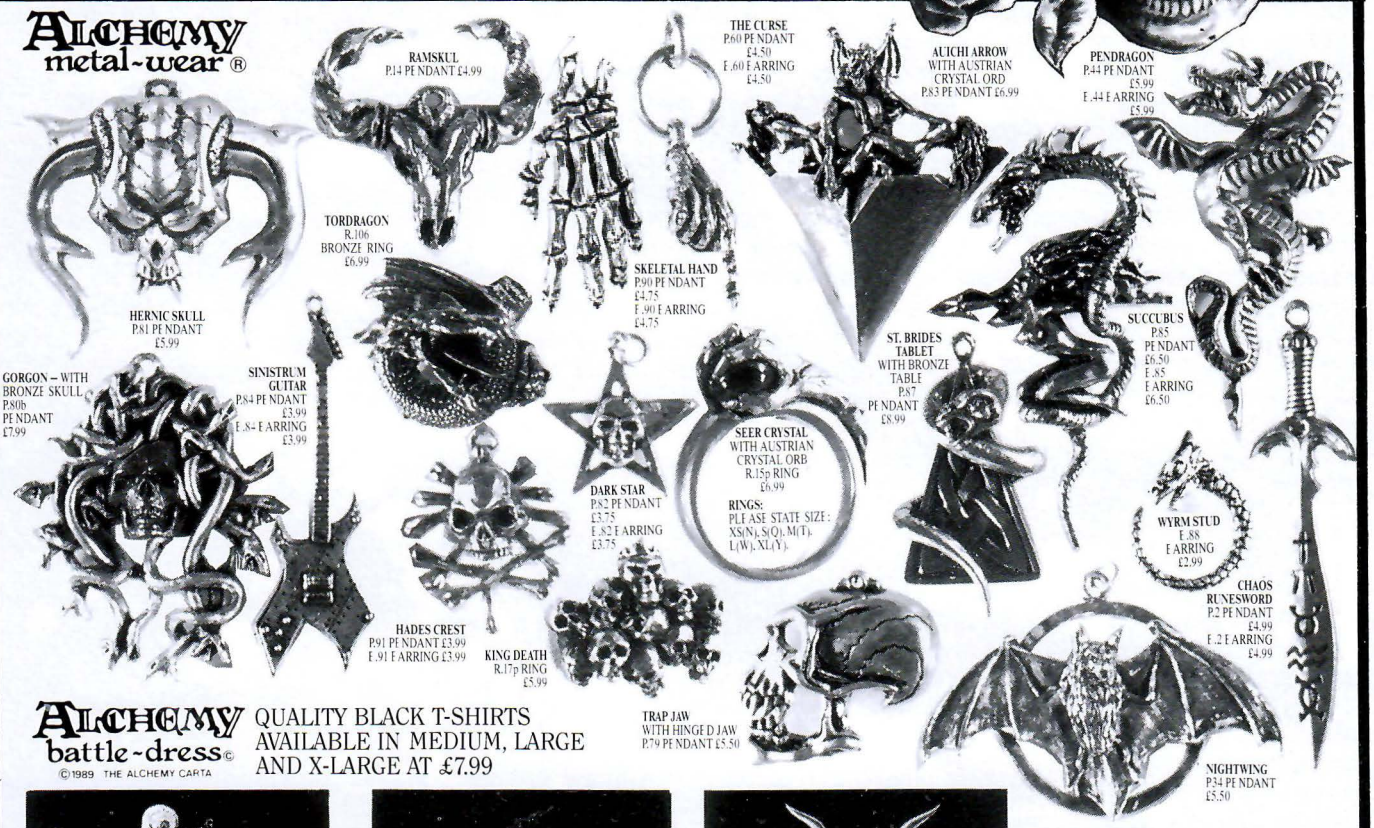

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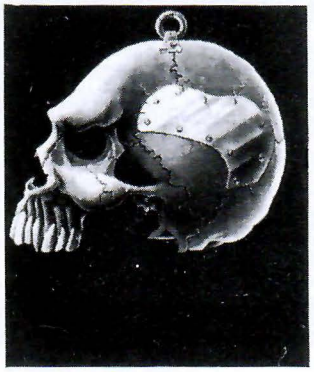

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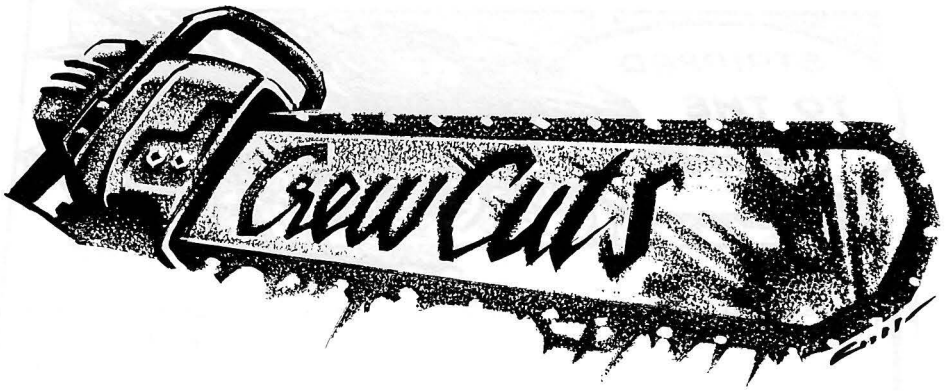


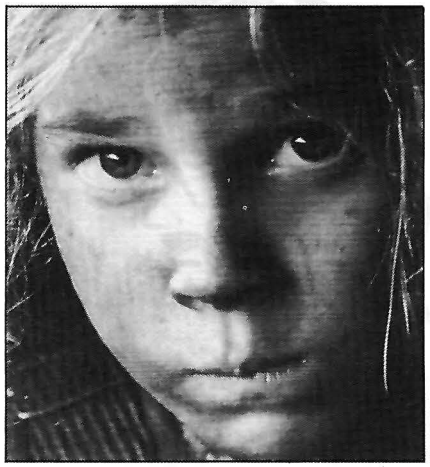


PHOTO: Seamus Ryan

Jessica Palmer, American authoress of short stories and academic works, is an occasional columnist. Or vice versa.

I am — like many other writers — your plain, ordinary obsessive-compulsive with grandiose delusions. It takes an obsessive-compulsive to sit down every day and write something that nobody may ever read. Furthermore, it takes delusions of grandeur to believe someone should want to read it.

Yet most people are impressed when I tell them I'm a writer. The attitude rapidly changes when I tell them in what genre. It seems, for reasons unknown to me, people are a trifle frightened of horror writers. The reaction never ceases to amaze me. Horror writers are just like everyone else. We eat; we sleep; we worry about bills. We perspire when it's hot and shiver when it's cold. For instance, there's little to differentiate me from my neighbours. One could not pick my house from the others on the tiny little street where I live, except by the garlands of garlic hanging in the windows.

I am relatively harmless and my fangs retractable, however. So why do people run from me when I approach? I think it is based on this ill-found belief that horror writers are somehow different. What do people expect? Gore-spattered laboratory coats? Scales? Horns? Cloven hooves? Perhaps they think we wander about dragging our viscera behind us. If you were to put I and several other of my compatriots in a police line-up, who besides maybe James Herbert, Clive Barker or Stephen King, would be immediately recognisable?

But let me give you one point to ponder: Have you ever seen a horror writer barefoot? I only ask because, having spent eight years in Houston, a reclaimed swamp, this month's cover star is one about which I feel I can speak with some limited authority. There, something growing and green is as likely to be mould as plantlife. Cockroaches are measured in inches, often achieving such size they could easily be saddled and ridden to the store.

Its nearest neighbour, Louisiana, is an unreclaimed swamp. That state boasts the world's longest bridge. Some twenty-seven miles long, it rises rise over foetid, murky water. The twisted trees have roots which look like they have developed an arthritic condition, the bark is coated in fungus and their branches weighted by grey Spanish moss. When driving through the area, it looks mysterious and beautiful — if one doesn't look too closely. Under intense scrutiny, one discovers the cockroaches there make Houston's look an anaemic. It is inhabited by things, both animal and vegetable, which creep, crawl and slither.

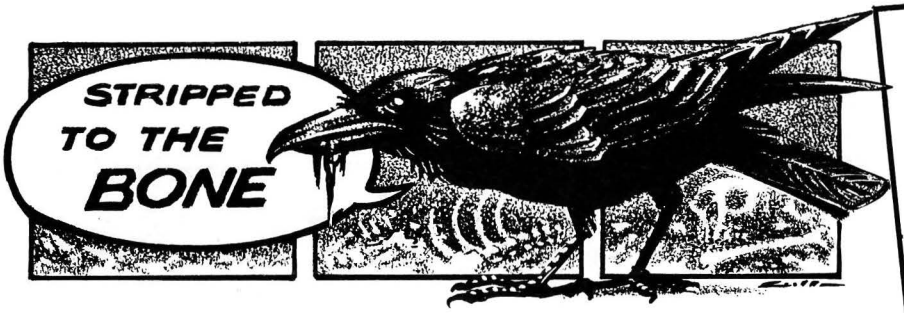
For some reason, swamps touch an atavistic nerve in all of us. Perhaps it has something to do with man's innate fear of things dark and damp — a topic about which Freud wrote volumes. Personally, I believe it has something more to do with our unwillingness to look at our own origins. If one adhered to Darwin's theory of evolution, then everyone of us — no matter how vaunted our bloodline — arose from the bog. When looking around at our fellow man, who can deny this? Haven't you ever come away from a business transaction where you felt slightly coated with slime? Consider lawyers — like mine at 'Dewey, Fleacem and Howe' — and Darwin's theory doesn't seem all that far off.

Amongst the more notable marsh denizens are alligators. They live in the bayous in southern Texas and Louisiana and range as far east as the Florida Everglades. Studying the beasts' mating habits is another convincing piece of pro-Darwinian evidence. Courtship begins when the male bellows. The female is drawn by the sound and actually chooses her partner for this rather dubious ability. She is then butted in the flank by the male-s snout — the 'gator's equivalent to an elbow in the ribs — and lovemaking begins. Now I ask you, have we really evolved so far after all?

"I am — like many other writers — your plain, ordinary obsessive-compulsive with grandiose delusions."

This month's comics reviewer James Wallis writes in London, where it is possible to live only at night. He likes it like that.

All comic art from Puma Blues © Walking Man Comics 1989.

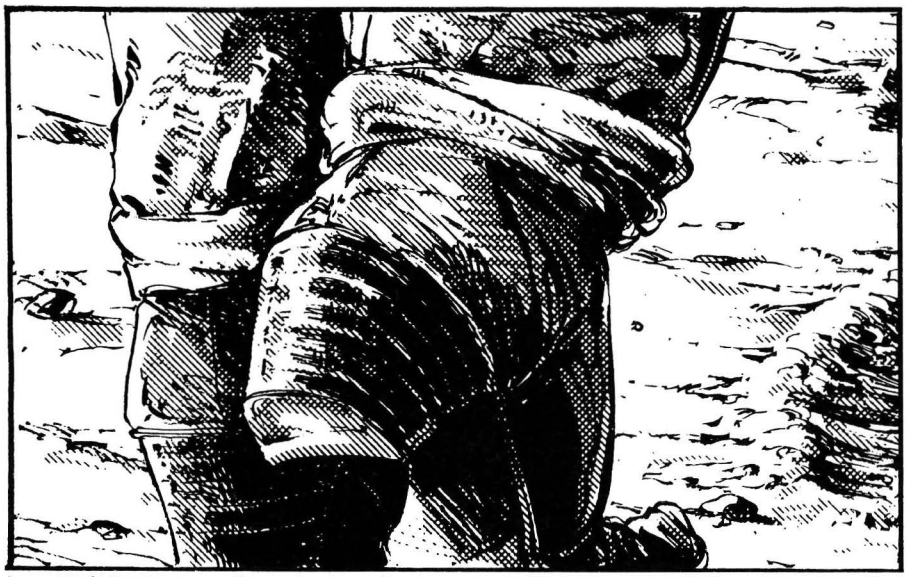


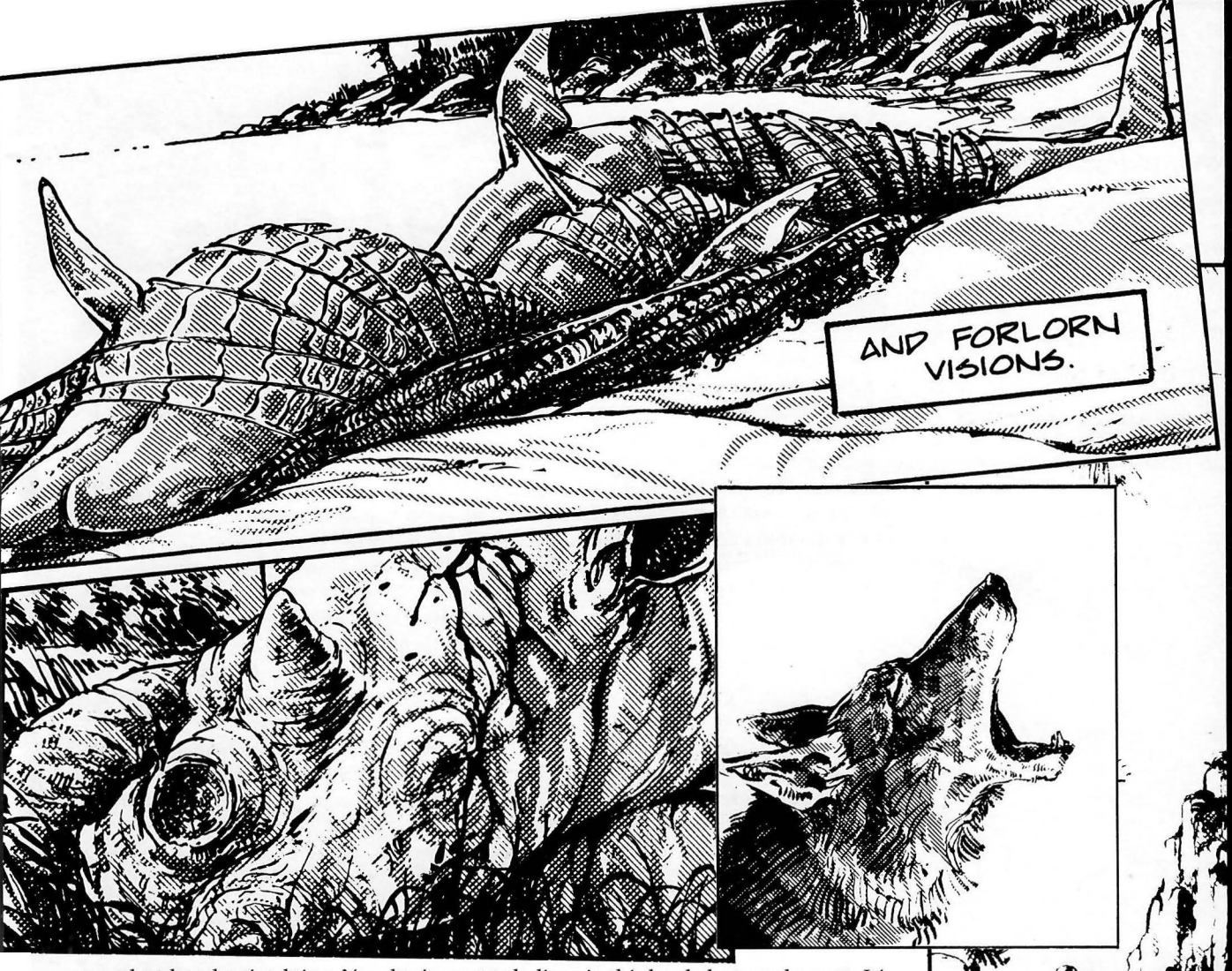
There's a nasty taste in the air of the late twentieth century that says that everything that can be done good has been done good, and I'm here to tell you it just ain't so. No sir. Chaos and strangeness are alive and growing in the heart of the comic book medium, and if you give them a chance they'll get into your heart too. For your consideration and hard-won cash: three original works.

SHADE THE CHANGING MAN is an interesting tale. Say you're twenty-three, female, pretty, and three years ago you came home to discover a serial killer in the act of butchering your mother and father chanting, "I'm not mad. I get mad but I'm not mad". Today the killer, Troy Grenzer, is going to be electrocuted and, having recently got out of a mental home, you're outside the prison waiting for 7am, frying time. And then something happens and there's the electric chair in front of you and Grenzer is in your car telling you that he's really a space being called Shade who is just using Grenzer's body and he tells you to drive. Then it begins to get ugly.

This is not the comic you were expecting. *Nobody* was expecting this. Pete Milligan's earlier work (SKREEMER, STRANGE DAYS, PARADAX, *Johnny Nemo* and, more recently, *Rogan Gosh*) was enough to tell you he's warped, but this is hyper kablooey gone. And it's bloody good. The whole of America has gone mad, and Shade is the only one who can help us when a giant head of JFK comes through the pavement in Dallas and Kennedy is shot again and again and again. It's not an easy comic to get a handle on. As soon as you think you're beginning to get a grip on the plot, the book lurches and throws you off again. The art starts off like a normal colourful superhero romp but doesn't stay that way, getting gritty and strange and experimental, and the colours leap up and down the spectrum like a Jimi Hendrix solo played at the wrong speed. Shade will disturb you. It's fun.

PUMA BLUES is more downbeat. It's maybe 20 years in the future, and the environment has fallen apart. UV levels are massive, acid rain is a national problem and this is a journey through the mind of Gavia Immer to the heart of America. It's not a pleasant trip. The black and white art (beautiful, beautiful) draws you in and suddenly you realise what you're reading. This is a horror story about the environment and if you thought that the Green overkill had taken all the power to shock from that little baby, think again. Stephen Murphy and Michael Zulli know





exactly what they're doing. You don't want to believe in this book, but you have to. It's too real.

Hard to say exactly what's going on . . . it's like life. You drift from one thing to another and life gets darker and stranger as you go. There's an undercurrent about UFOs and some strange flying mantas, but since the second book started (issue 21) some of that seems to have been left behind. Gavia Immer is drifting across America like a flake of fallout, undecided, but tainting everything he passes. There's a lot of fact mixed in with the fiction, but they're the sort of facts you don't want to know. Anyone else doing this would sound trite and preachy; PUMA BLUES chills to the bone.

The story's not an easy one to follow, let alone to make sense of, but you'll get picked up by the wave and carried along until it crashes on the shore. EASY RIDER meets ON THE BEACH. It's not a comic to read after a bad day at work and there's nothing on TV, because it'll depress you. But it's the right kind of depression; it makes you want to scream at the world to look at itself and change, not want to open your wrists in a lukewarm bath. Not your average comic at all.

THE SHADOWMEN also touches on UFOs, but in a more tangential way. It's not the first comic to use the idea of the Men In Black (MIBs), who visit people who have seen strange phenomena and attempt to interrogate or intimidate them, but it's the first one to get the atmosphere right. This is ruthless, unpleasant stuff, that's for sure.

It's very hard to believe that this Mark Millar's second comic. The first is SAVIOUR, from the same publisher, which was notable for casting Johnathan Ross in the role of the Antichrist. This is his second. *Jesus.* It's enough to make a writer weep. I'd be tempted to say that this was Neil Gaiman writing under a pseudonym, except there are too few words and too much action for it to be Neil. This guy is bloody good. I hope he doesn't get big-headed before he hits the big time.

And the art! Splattered whites, impressioned greys; an unfocussed look so that when something is shown in bleak black clarity it really stands out. The cheap paper doesn't really help, but you can overlook that. This is one of those comics that colour would spoil. The whole thing is a maelstrom of dark images and sensations, and it's not like anything you've seen before. After one issue it's hard to tell what's going to happen, but you should be there to find out. This one is going to be very good indeed.

Steve Bissette, editor/ publisher of horror and comics anthology *Taboo* and artist on the most important *Swamp Thing* stories, takes a special look at the 'roots' of our favourite muck-encrusted comics characters.

ORIGINS

It began for DC Comics and for their character, Swamp Thing, with a story Len Wein and Berni Wrightson drew in HOUSE OF SECRETS #92; the cover story, in fact. It was a beautifully crafted eight-page tale — deceit results in scientist Alex Olsen's apparent death via a chemical explosion, followed by his resurrection as a moss-encrusted monster. A simple, but effective, gothic tear-jerker with a truly sympathetic monster at its heart. Given over a year to consider further (and a strong response from the readers of the tale), Wein and Wrightson rearranged the key elements into the story of scientist Alec Holland, killed in a chemical explosion only to be reborn as a mossy, monstrous vegetable-being — Swamp Thing! It shambled into its own title in late 1972 . . . and so it began.

It actually began, of course, much earlier than that. It began, perhaps, in 1940, with *It*, one of Theodore Sturgeon's early stories in the pulp title UNKNOWN, surely the literary grandfather of all the comic-book swamp-monsters: the Heap, Swamp Thing, Man-Thing, sundry mossmen and muck-monsters. Sturgeon's *It* was spawned by some chemical imbalance in the forest floor: a mystical genesis. The comic-book offspring opted for more 'scientific' trappings for the man-to-monster transformation. Thus, in May 1971, Ted Sallis injects himself with a top-secret chemical formula that would "change an ordinary soldier into an indestructible warrior" seconds before crashing into the murky Everglades, where "the waters of the swamp interacting with the highly unstable solution" gives birth to the Man-Thing (SAVAGE TALES #1). About the same time, coincidentally or otherwise, Wein and Wrightson had already finished their version of the same song.

". . . Swamp Thing's [eyes] brim with sorrow . . . baring awareness, intelligence, soul."

On the comic-stands of June-July 1971, Alex Olsen had his unfortunate 'accident' which begat, a little over a year later, Alec Holland's unfortunate 'accident' — sending his torched body hurtling into the bayou water, his flesh soaked with "countless unclassified chemicals" including his 'Bio-Restorative Formula'. One month later saw the striking swamp monster drawn by Neal Adams on the cover of THE PHANTOM STRANGER #14, from Len Wein's story *The Spectre of the Stalking Swamp*. This ties into Len's script for SWAMP THING #11, using Professor Zachary Nail and his doomed 'New Eden'. And in September 1971, Skywald put out a one-shot showcasing its swamp monster, the Heap!

What differed in each of these creatures was the 'heart' their respective creators has invested them with . . . or the lack of same. The murderous, misunderstood Heap, the mindlessly-empathic Man-Thing and the tortured, pitiable-but-powerful Swamp Thing. All had the monstrous visages, the impossibly misshapen bodies composed of swamp matter . . . but the eyes tell the story. The Heap's flare with rage; the insect-like orbs of the Man-Thing are empty but coldly compelling; Swamp Thing's brim with sorrow, terribly human eyes trapped in a monster's body, baring awareness, intelligence, soul, Perhaps we are drawn into those eyes; perhaps we can identify all too well with the alienation and sadness they reveal. Perhaps that might account for the success the character still enjoys, surviving on the news-stands where its kith and kin have perished.

It began for Tom Veates when he landed the art chores on the revival of the book THE SAGA OF THE SWAMP THING. It was Tom's first regular gig, doing a monthly book after years of catch-as-catch-can freelancing, and we all knew that Tom was the best 'swamp-artist' around. Having travelled through Burroughs' Africa mentally since childhood, he physically explored the South American jungles as an adult. Tom's tropics, veldts and swamplands came alive on the pages he drew. It seemed a natural in lots of ways, although I reckon the potential beauty implicit in the character and setting interested him far more than the inevitable horrors ever would or could.

Another source of considerable enthusiasm was the rush of energy behind the revival of the title and the upcoming movie based on the Wein/Wrightson original. DC was pushing the book and its creative team, Veates and writer Marty Pasko, with high expectations. It seemed quite likely that the movie would be terrific (I was excited by the info that Wes Craven was directing the film as his previous horror movie THE HILLS HAVE EYES packed considerable punch). Well, the film sort of

slunk out of sight: a kid's monster movie with its merits and moments undermined by a disposable climax and unconvincing low-budget monster-movie makeup. And, unfortunately for Tom, Marty saw fit to have Swamp Thing abandon the swamps in issue #1, only to finally return to the lush Louisiana bayou in the last panels of Tom's finale as artist on the book, #13. Tom had done some incredible work in the meantime but, although his collaboration with Marty on the series had yielded issues and sequences of imaginative and unusual impact, there was no denying that the collaborators and elements seemed too often at odds with each other.

Tom's best work carries the energy of the outdoors and being alive, strong splashy visuals cleanly rendered in a classical tradition depicting action, intrigue . . . adventure! With a due respect, Marty's densely-layered novelistic convolutions and subterfuges, conundrums and deceit, plus an almost surreal paranoia of corporate, government and religious powers gone absolutely corrupt and amok, seemed ill-suited for Tom's strengths as an artist and, perhaps, for the character of Swamp Thing itself. And though everyone was giving it their best shot, it became obvious that the collaboration wasn't going too well. The art seemed stifled, the theatrics stilted and, as the cosmic soap-opera involving all the new characters introduced in the series gained thirteen issues' worth of momentum, Swamp Thing became lost in his own title, a spectator rather than star participant. An ungainly, unloved, self-pitying mossy misfit who always had to ride in the back of the bus, hidden away in crates, kayoed out of the action before it even began. He was, in fact, a dwindling and dying figure in the actual context of Marty's saga, a victim of slow bacteriological poisoning induced by the Sunderland Corporation's conspiracy against Alec Holland/Swamp Thing and his associates. Confusion, despair and angst dominated the proceedings. Appropriate material for a horror comic, certainly, but it simply wasn't working as it should have, or *could* have. The potential and the material itself ceased to interest Tom. He yearned for something new and contacted John Totleben and myself with the idea of our taking over the book together.

Both John and I had pitched in to help Tom during his run on the series: John had pencilled and/or inked with Tom since SAGA OF THE SWAMP THING #2 and #3, and worked especially hard on #10, earning co-artist credit, while I laid out nearly all of #8 from Marty's script and helped a bit on the climatic Golem pages of #11. We both had a pronounced obsession with the monstrous and bizarre. We knew that we worked well together, having just completed a black and white Dracula story, *The Blood Bequest* for BIZARRE ADVENTURES. We both knew deep down that if we were going to take on a regular on-going four-colour comic, SWAMP THING was it . . . there were no other horror titles to work on at that time and John had an especially strong affinity with the Swamp Thing character.

Besides, each of us, separately, had reached the ends of our ropes, freelancing on whatever we would find. In an industry flush with superheroes we were odd men out, with absolutely no interest in the sort of long-john antics that seem to dominate every niche of the comics industry. While together in New Jersey, designing monster figurines for TSR with, among others, Rick Veitch, we squeezed in time to work up our samples to bring up to SOTST's editor, and the character's benevolent creator, Len Wein

It began, for me, with an abiding fascination for all things green and grotesque: bugs, lizards, frogs, Gumby, Godzilla, Gorgo, Swamp Thing. It began with getting off on the wrong foot completely: trying to arrive at a credible depiction of Swamp Thing without so much as a glance at the Wrightson original. Only the contours of the face remained lodged in my memory and the knowledge that his body was a powerful mass of plant tissue. The initial results were less than satisfactory. The face and the eyes were close, but the all-too-human body shape captured none of the moody characteristics of the *true* Swamp Thing. In trying to dodge comparison with the Wrightson original, in whose giant footsteps we were trying to follow, I had thrown the baby out with the bathwater!

The solution, of course, was to return to the character's 'roots' (*sic*); to extrapolate on the more monstrous aspects of the Wein-Wrightson creation: add more weight to those massive slumped shoulders, his head jutting turtle-like on that bull neck; exaggerate the beetling brown and the facial 'muzzle'; emphasize the textures of the roots and overgrowth that ripple over the surface of his body. Reworking my pencils considerably, John arrived at a vision of Swamp Thing that only a mother could love . . . or a father: Len Wein. We began work with issue #16. Oddly enough, I held that issue in my hands at about the same time as I cradled my newborn baby daughter in my arms for the first time. In every way, it was a time for new beginnings.

Believe you me, life hasn't been the same since.

"An ungainly, unloved, self-pitying mossy misfit . . . a victim of slow bacteriological poisoning . . ."

". . . John [Totleben] arrived at a vision of Swamp Thing that only a mother could love . . ."

Issues pulled at random from the two decades of the SWAMP THING comic reveal bewildering changes in artwork, writing and plot lines. Can Jonathan Key make sense of it all?

SWAMPED

Our swamps are hemmed in by concrete, with the red of Coke cans and the yellow of dead burger wrappers the only vegetation to be seen. It is no, therefore, surprising that the real swamps of the American Deep South hold a particular horror of their own. The vibrant decadence of a place where birth, death and the struggle in-between are not carefully sanitised for 'civilised' acceptance inspires both revulsion and awe — the sort of revulsion that draws you into a book like a passer-by at a fire.

Now picture a scene in this deathly, alive bayou (for that is what those in the Deep South call their swamps). Picture a young scientist working hard in a lonely shack in the depths of the swamp, perfecting his discovery — a bio-restorative formula. Picture him being interrupted by three men, then attacked and knocked unconscious. Now see him waking up only to find a bomb strapped under his workbench.

The explosion sends him and his formula burning into the muddy swamp outside. Death by fire and water.

Hours later, something emerges from the swamp, a grotesque parody of humanity seemingly formed from pure vegetation. Neither a man nor a monster, this is in a way the truest type of alien — a human except to all appearances. This is the origin of, and in a sense, the destiny of, the Swamp Thing.

The original tale of the Swamp Thing appeared in one of DC Comics' horror anthology magazines — *House of Secrets*, and was all of eight pages in length.

It told of the unfortunate Alex Olsen and his return from his muddy grave in order to save his widow from hypodermic death at the hands of Damian Ridge (Alex's ex-best friend). Understandably, she is somewhat undecided as to which 'monster' is the more frightening, so proto-swampman is condemned to wander the lonely parts of the world in search of a sympathetic series of his own.

The Swamp Thing's creators, Len Wein (writer) & Berni Wrightson (artist) did not have long to wait before the series was commissioned, as the initial short story was, as the phrase goes, 'highly acclaimed'. The series began in 1972, with the situation and characters altered somewhat. The original story had been a gothic piece — the classic Victorian monster tale turned around — but the Swamp Thing series is set in present-day America, with all that this entails. Alex Olsen became Alec Holland (and still becomes the Swamp Thing), Damian transmogrifies into a group of terrorists and Linda (Alec's wife) now dies at an early stage of the story, leaving the shambling mud-man with not a friend in all of humanity.

The early stories were mainly blessed by Berni Wrightson's pleasantly horrific artwork, with the stories themselves (still scripted by Len Wein) mainly concerning the wretched activities of the Swamp Thing's quickly-established arch-enemy; Anton Arcane. As the Swamp Thing searches for some kind of cure to what he hopes is just a temporary (if grotesque and very severe) disfigurement, a neat piece of irony has ARCANE striving to become immortal, at the expense of his own humanity.

The original series was cancelled after less than two years, with the Swamp Thing only making the occasional guest appearance in other DC comics until, in the early '80s, DC decided that the Wein-Wrightson mantle should be taken up by Marty Pasko and Tom Yeates. Arcane returned in a 'final' desperate bid to extend his life by taking control of the Swamp Thing's resilient body but predictably, failed at the last and died in the process (although it must be noted that in comics 'death' is just a state of rest entered into until the writer can think of another storyline involving the character). This era of the comic book (still in its late teens) saw the arrival of the creative team that was to produce the most influential and controversial stories since the original shocker back in 1972. Tom Yeates left the book before the end of the Arcane storyline, and was replaced by Steven Bissette (penciller) and John Totleben (inker). A couple of issues later Arcane was dead, and Pasko decided to move on, allowing DC to draft in a British writer who had suddenly started turning heads with Future Shock stories for *2000AD* and two stories, *Marvelman* (later *Miracleman*) and *V for Vendetta* (later optioned by DC) for the now-defunct *Warrior*. He was Alan Moore.

Although there have been many creators on the book throughout its chequered history, Alan Moore is the single writer who has contributed both the most in terms of quantity (nearly four years of writing for the book) and in terms of development of the distinctive style and atmosphere of the Swamp Thing and by extension, that of the entire genre. Moore's inauguration into the book came at a time which might justifiably be called a watershed for the Swamp Thing. He was killed. Of course, under the bewhiskered Brit's guidance the man-plant was going to come in for quite a lot of this, so it was perhaps just as well that Moore wanted to quickly sort out the character's previously botched origins and show *just* what it was. Those who have read some of Moore's other work will recognise it as part of his perfectly normal psychoses; he just can't help it.

The original Wein-Wrightson explanation of the character only went as far as was necessary in 1972, leaving Alec Holland's fate undecided, but with the general belief that his body was somehow encased by the vegetation and mud, providing the Swamp Thing with a quest; a hope, however forlorn, that he might one day find a method to undo the drastic effects of the bio-restorative formula and become human again. However, this cosy ever-searching never— progressing situation was permanently destroyed by Moore's *Anatomy Lesson* story (Issue 20, or the first story in Titan's *Swamp Thing Book 1*), where it is revealed that the shambling mound of foliage is actually pure vegetation that has acquired the consciousness of the dead Dr Holland. This, inevitably, leads to the kind of extended character study that Alan Moore relishes, as the Swamp Thing ponders over the course of several episodes about the worthlessness of his existence in the light of this newly-obtained knowledge. There cannot be many comic books where the central character gives up living and merges with the mass— psyche of the earth itself, becoming a vegetable in all sense of the word.

The stories by now were on more varied subjects than before. In place of Arcane came a series of strange adversaries and strangers:- Dr Jason Woodrue — 'The Floronic Man' ; Etrigan the rhyming demon ; Nukeface the irradiated man (who, contrary to the 'normal' effect of radiation in comics, has not gained miraculous powers, but

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instead wanders aimlessly, irradiating everything he comes across as he slowly dies); Pog the oh-so-cute alien; and most chillingly, Paul, the autistic who *knows* that you must spell everything right otherwise the Monkey King will come and get you . . .

However, through this period of rapid movement from subject to subject, the constant aspect of change came from the important character alterations undergone by the Swamp Thing. He had already established that he was pure plant-matter, but accepting this and a new role apart from his lost humanity, came more slowly. Issue 27 — *The Burial* (in Titan reprints *Volume 2*) saw Alec Holland's skeleton exhumed from its underwater grave and given a proper laying to rest. This effectively marks the end of the old Swamp Thing-as-semi-human and the start of Swamp Thing— as-plant-elemental; his new role.

At this point again, Moore;s instinct to draw all of the previous stories/mistakes/inconsistencies throughout the years into one fairly coherent explanation was displayed. The original 8-page try-out story was reused in issue 33 (in Titan reprints *Book 4*), Alex Olsen and all. The explanation was that over the years, there had been several Swamp Things (this being just one of them), spawned from the mother Earth when she was in some danger. Thus the creation of our own Swamp Thing is now not just explainable on a pseudo-scientific level, but also on an elemental scale, giving poor old Alec (as was) some reassurance that he's there for a reason. However, this purpose was only slowly revealed to the man-mangrove as the Moore-Bissette— Totleben team embarked upon their last, and longest story together, designed to bring together everything the three had planned for the comic before the artists left after issue 50. In the meantime, something far more intriguing, unusual and illegal was happening to our hero the plant . . .

Swamp Thing, as a comic book, has never exactly been a stranger to controversy in its time and Alan Moore is justifiably credited with bringing the axe down on several sacred cows of comicdom. Who, then, would be surprised at the results of bringing the two together? Well, the Comics Code Authority for a start.

Problems arose with the start of *The Arcane Trilogy* (yes, *him* again) in issue 29 (Titan reprints *volume 3*). Titled *Love and Death,* the story covered most of the subjects that the CCA objected to, causing a complete rejection of the issue in that form. To DC's credit, it decided not to tone down the contents and went ahead with publication without the seal of approval. The outcry was minimal, indicating both the increasing maturity of the readership and that the CCA's time had past.

Swamp Thing, along with an increasing number of 'new era' comics (*Hellblazer, Sandman, Black Orchid,* etc.), has permanently lost the CCA seal and looks all the better for it. It was perhaps somewhat to do with this newfound freedom that issue 34 — *The Rite of Spring* got published. Like its namesake by Stravinsky, the story was more than a little controversial, going down in legend as the 'Vegetable Sex' issue. For a while, Abby had been the Swamp Thing's closest confidante, even to the extent of him descending to Hell in order to rescue her damned soul. In *The Rite of Spring* however, their peculiar attachment was brought to the surface and resulted in the consummation of one of the most bizarre relationships imaginable. It was all very tastefully done, with the sharing of a hallucinogenic gourd grown inside the Swamp Thing's body cementing the relationship.

Perhaps the most telling comment on SWAMP THING as a horror comic is that this issue, concerned as it is purely with love, resulted in more new readers coming to the book than any other issue of its time.

If anyone wants to get straight to the heart of Swamp Thing, to see horror with a vegetable hero at its most painfully powerful, they would be unfailingly directed to the epic *American Gothic* saga. Running from issues 37 to 50 (or the more easily found Titan reprints *volumes 5 to 8*), this represented the culmination of Alan Moore's work with Steve Bissette and John Totleben, simultaneously trying to assess the rotten decadence of the USA, the true power of the Swam Thing, and the universal relationship between good and evil. High-powered stuff.

No less impressive was the cast list. Besides the Swamp Thing itself and Abby, the saga introduced a new accomplice: the very British John Constantine, as well as werewolves, zombies, dope— heads, ghosts, racists, the Invunche (surely the most horrific creature in the book's history), a plethora of old supernatural DC heroes and demons too numerous to mention. The excuse for this massive collection of horror-types was that of the impending doom of the known universe.

So, an ancient and evil South American sect of male priests, the Brujeria, who already have much of the the earth under their collective thumb, wish to summon an entity of immense age and evil in order to destroy Heaven for them. Crazy they may be, stupid they're not. The increasing amount of fear and unexplainable horror evident in the American Deep South as the saga progresses is a part of their summoning, for as we all know, belief is power. However, on top of this slightly dubious plotline

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SUGGESTED FOR MATURE READERS
SWAMP THING
by Rick Veitch and Alfredo Alcala
BRISTOLEBOO
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"There cannot be many comic books where the central character gives up living and merges with the mass-psyche of the earth itself, becoming a vegetable in all senses of the word."

(although it is made infinitely more plausible by Constantine's confusing and taunting presence) is Moore's own set of comments on the problems of the real America today.

Where there are zombies, the story is really about racism; where there are ghosts, it is really about the terrors of guns; and where there is a mass-murderer, the tale is truly about the crazed notions of acceptability in America today. However, with all of this marvellous build-up, with the desperate attempts by Swamp Thing and Constantine to cobble together a resistance to the summoning and especially with a plummeting of the scene of action to the depths of Hell itself, some were both surprised and disappointed by the ending and implications that the story was finally given. Some readers complained that it did not say anything fundamentally new, some that it was depressing, many that it was simply disconcerting.

Perhaps even in an apparently lukewarm success with the conclusion of *American Gothic,* Moore has scored a kind of victory in making people *think* about what is really horrific or not. And that's rare in itself.

As the weary Swamp Thing reader emerges, blinking, from the demonically black depths of the *American Gothic* saga, he hardly has a chance to extend his tendrils into the reassuring dirt of terra firma before he is toppled into our herbacious hero's next problem. Only this time it is normal humans who are the cause of the trouble. This time the horror is for real. As the scale of the story draw in from the cosmic to the individual level, the reader is forced to refocus from the gloriously clean black and white of the universe's absolute forces — good and evil — to the black and white 'real world' of newspapers and of normal, bigoted, hypocritical people.

The *Bride of the Bog God* affair — the exposure of Swampy and Abby's relationship to the general public — made a challenging and effective counterpoint to the American Gothic storyline. Swamp Thing having survived the fires of Hell, was finally destroyed in every sense by the roaring flames of public hatred.

The period of issues 32-50 (Titan books 4-8) had been a kaleidoscopic collage of horrific realities seeping out from behind the facade of normality. In this, the reader and the Swamp Thing were brought together in their shared alienation and confusion. However, by the end of *American Gothic,* the Swamp Thing was once again the alien; a man displaced into the literally earth-shattering role of earth elemental.

Alan Moore's final major storyline was, therefore, a trial by fire for the Swamp Thing to ensure before being able to take his deserved position in his own microcosmic society. Having been destroyed by the D.D.I. (a secret government organisation that the now deceased Matt Cable worked for — no prizes for spotting a future plotline in *that* one), Swamp Thing manages to reassemble his consciousness on a far-away planet, then embarks upon a grand tour of some of the further flung worlds hanging around the universe. While this may sound like the cue for a series of horribly facile Dan Dare tales, these stories are in fact some of the most poetic, haunting, mysterious and quite possibly pretentious put together to date. Definitely not the place to start reading the comic (they form *volumes 10 and 11* of the Titan reprints), but the 'trips' into space form what is for many the artistic highlight of the entire series.

The departure of Alan Moore from the saga prompted a widespread shaking of heads, gnashing of teeth and fortelling of disaster for the title as the prime mover moved on. Comic-watchers mused, hypothesised, and then strained to hear the terrible non-sound of falling sales as the new writer was announced. He was Rick Veitch. He was an artist.

The idea that Veitch would step in as both writer and penciller was mostly regarded as a stop-gap arrangement. However, as it turned out, for the twenty or so issues until his departure, Rick Veitch formed the heart of a much larger creative team. Without obtaining absolute creative consistency, DC managed to keep the title running with a group of artists already experienced in drawing the Swamp Thing — Veitch, Bissette, Totleben, Yeates, Alcala et al. Veitch competently wrote most of these tales himself, with full-ins by other familiar writers such as Jamie HELLBLAZER Delano and yet another artist/writer, Steve Bissette.

In all fairness it would be true to say that the SWAMP THING title seemed to lose its direction somewhat in the this rather disjointed period. Rick Veitch, for his part, produced some decent work in both of his roles, including such neat tricks as triple paralleling of events for an entire issue. However, being passed through so many hands the comic could not help but lose some of its sharpness and gain some rough edges in transit.

The most interesting aspect of the book's nature as left by Moore and taken up by Veitch is that the Swamp Thing's character essentially stopped changing. Instead of the previous confused wanderings of mind and body, Swamp Thing now resides in comparative ease with his wife, child (yes, child), friends and even his friendly neighbourhood traiteur (that's healer to you and me).

Of course it would be wrong to imply that the series has necessarily declined in quality. All continuing series experience periods of relative stagnation, as the scope of the stories simply cannot be infinitely extended. Indeed in many ways Rick Veitch was able to use this stable base to explore more fully aspects of society and its relationship to the environment. The comic has always managed to tackle fairly heavy issues with an aggressively radical style, and this undertow of social concern has provided the series with a great deal of its strength. Swamp Thing is, of course, green in every sense.

This brings us unavoidably to the tragic tale of the Swamp Thing's time-travel story. Thrown back in time by a mysterious piece of amber by steps through the ages, the whole sequence of tales was little more than an excuse to dig out some of DC's more moudly old characters and give them a quick airing. Matters reached a head around issue 85, with a grand total of eight guest stars riding in from the Wild West of DC Comics. While this might just have been fascinating for DC completists, for the rest of us this must just about mark the low point of the series to date. Fortunately for all concerned, the glimpses we get of Veitch's delightful bayou community help to compensate for the somewhat dubious quality of the adventures of the Swamp Thing himself. Sadly for Swampy his absence from here and now means that he misses the pregnancy of Abby, a conception achieved by means that, as often in the series, defy concise description.

The climax of the tale ended up being an attempt to link Swamp Thing's elemental status and the time trip itself to the creation of Life As We Know It. This, with its convoluted mysticism and reek of those aching paradoxes that haunt time travel stories, is as competant a resolution to the whole expedition as could be expected under the circumstances. Ah, but what circumstances.

Echoes of *Love and Death* and the bold experimentalism of *Rite of Spring* were not enough to save the story that Rick Veitch scripted for issue 88. It concerned the arrival of the Swamp Thing at the crucifixion. The story had been approved by the comic's long-standing editor, Karen Berger, but was referred all the way up to DC's head honcho, Jenette Kahn. She spiked the issue on the grounds that DC didn't want to intermingle fictional and historical figures in such a way. Of course, the story's portrayal of Jesus as a white magician would have undoubtedly lead to immense problems with America's bible belt.

Unfortunately, this decision meant that the readers of the comic would have to not only kiss goodbye to the story, but also its writer. Rick Veitch decided that with this sort of treatment it was time to move on. So, unexpectedly, DC was forced to dig around for a replacement writer. The comic sat on hold for three months while DC hired someone not only capable of writing the series, but also willing and able to finish satisfactorily the unresolved time-travel saga. Eventually they latched onto a virtual unknown, Doug Wheeler.

Wheeler's solution to the time-travel conundrum was to have the Swamp Thing plant, at the dawn of time, the seed that would form his ancestor, forming a casual loop. Now installed for the best part of a year, Wheeler has managed to hearten those still yearning for the golden age of Alan Moore's tenure. His style can tend to the overlay wordy, but the feel of the stories very much harks back to the old days. This is most apparent in the makeup of the group of satellite characters who drift in and out of the series. Relatively few are truly original, continuity with the past being often preferred. However, where Rick Veitch would call on DC characters from all over, Doug Wheeler will tend to stick to those developed specifically for the series, such as Pog. Added interest comes from Wheeler's evidently growing confidence with the series, and it may well be that the man who will no doubt take the series to its 100th issue is capable of producing some of the most interesting stories to date.

When considering the issues that the comic covers, the stories and characters that actually make the series what it is, one thing becomes clear — *The Saga of the Swamp*

Artwork: © DC Comics, Inc.

Thing is not about the Swamp Thing. For all the self-discovery that the plant-man goes through, the greatest insights that we, the readers, gain are into the diverse supporting cast. We see into the thoughts of Abby Cable; the horrifi-beautiful love that blossoms between the Swamp Thing and this, well, unique lady being not only one of the most surprising and shocking occurences of the books, but also a wonderful tool for examining a whole section of human experience (the attraction/revulsion/love/fear complex).

Abby is more than just a supporting character; as a human she represents the converse aspects of alienation to her lover — she willingly discards much of her 'humanity' or, as she might describe it, bigotry and suffers society's wrath as punishment. The irony is strongly indicated in the unthinking hate reaction produced when the relationship is exposed to public view, reflecting the general knee-jerk reaction of fear and loathing directed towards those perceptibly different from the norm (including, of course, the Swamp Thing himself). The study of nonconformity — the unusual, even supernatural (this is, after all, horror) — is central to the books then, shown in the central characters, and also explored in the problems faced by them — from the fury of repressed woman in *The Curse* through the aquatic vampires (see later) to black workers, still enslaved despite everything, in *Southern Change* and *Strange Fruit* (these particular stories appearing in the Titan reprint *volumes 5 & 6*).

Even this aspect of characterisation does not cover the force of the Swamp Thing's human accomplices. There is Chester, for instance; a Dead-Head eco-hippy of an age gone by. For a while there is Matt Cable — Abby's husband and another supportive friend, until he meet's a rather untimely end, then gets a more— than-odd job to do with the return of Arcane. His eventual degeneration to something less than a corpse, kept in a state of something less than life by a hospital with something less than his best interests at heart gives Abby some significant problems with society even after all the *Bride of the Bog-God* business has blown over.

Then there's John Constantine. The Hellblazer.

When it became apparent that much of Moore's work with Steve Bissette and John Totleben would resolve itself into the *American Gothic* saga, there was also a realisation that the Swamp Thing needed a guide to get him to the tale's conclusion — a Svengali who could not only show the hero the unknown outside, but also the unknown within. And so Constantine introduced himself into the storyline; sarcastic savant, mysterious messenger, enigmatic Englishman and everything else you could want from the only man who knows how to baffle a vegetable. In the Swamp Thing stories Constantine is a very different proposition to the self-doubting, haunted man in his own comic. He drifts in and out of the storyline with impeccable timing, playing the grand game of Chance, playing people off against each other and getting away with it — most of the time.

What Constantine does for the Swamp Thing in *American Gothic* is to give him a

"Of course, the story's portrayal of Jesus as a white magician would have undoubtedly lead to immense problems with America's bible belt."

focus — someone to direct his curiosity, power and anger at until the time is right. Until the end of the world. Constantine's plan is to slowly educate the confused and directionless Swamp Thing with the knowledge of his true purpose (as a plant elemental) so that he can draw on the power of the earth in facing the coming disaster. This he does ably, utilising his strange but knowledgeable contacts. As the demon Nergal had told Constantine 6 years before, power lies in names (see Hellblazer 11), and by now, John Constantine knows a lot of names.

Of course, someone as exciting and as usefully knowledgeable as Constantine won't just lay down and die after he has served the purpose which he was created — his enduring popularity has meant several reappearances in subsequent storylines, and the ultimate reward for a good character — his own series.

Finally, I guess that it's relatively important to know exactly what the Swamp Thing *is*. Yeah, Ok, so he's a shambling heap of rotting vegetation and mud, but that hardly covers it. The Swamp Thing represents, like the comic itself, a walking paradox. He is the monster and the not-monster; the man and the not-man; the alien and the lost soul; the hero and the victim. Swamp Thing is a victim. He was a victim from the moment that the obscure villains hid a bomb in his hut in the swamp, incinerating his human frame, from the moment that the burning corpse propelled itself by reflex into the slime green of the uncertain future.

Again, even in moving away from the ugly-monster-with-a-human— heart style of the earliest stories, it is still easy to taste the bitter paradox of the Swamp Thing's struggle to exist *as himself* in the context of a human society. In the underwater vampires stories (Issues 38 & 39, Titan *book 5*) the Swamp Thing destroys a colony of bloodsucking punks who survived his earlier flooding of their 'sick town'. The normal pseudo-scientific reasoning explains how they survive in water — the bacteria that causes vampirism is anaerobic, so the infected require no air, but it is the consideration of their fledgling society, although brief, which commands the most interest and, later, significance. Constantine (for whom read the writer's own voice of explanation and prediction) observes;

"They can *settle down*, after years of *hiding* . . .

They can *breed* . . ."

Is this an ironic prefiguration of the unaccommodating and fearful view that normal society later takes of the Swamp Thing and his bizarre relationship with Abby? Of course it is. After the immense *American Gothic* storyline, the next big topic to emerge from the typewriter of Alan Moore, continued as a theme since then, was society's refusal to accept the proverbial outsider. The knee-jerk hatred and fear of the unknown has been an obviously ripe fruit for successive writers of the comic to pick. That is after all the basic precept of the character of Swamp Thing; the monster is among us, but the truth is that he is just a monster amongst monsters. And that is the most horrifying tale of all.

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FRANKENSTEIN

Steve Hambidge was born 5th March 1970 in Northampton, England where he remains to this day growing old.

"I've been intent on producing comic strips for a number of years now. The following three pages were my first attempt at full colour which were done back in 1988 whilst on my Foundation course at Nene College.

It's a loose adaption of the Frankenstein theme seen through the monster's eyes as he wanders from the darkness of death gradually toward the light of day and life, until he is once more forced to wander the lightless valleys of death.

I largely done it at the time hoping to impress Dave McKean (a rather splendid chap) who had visited my college to give a slide show and lecture on his work and influences. It was here that I was first introduced to the work of Matt Mahurin, an American illustrator who combines painting and photography in a gorgeous way.

'Twas inspirational.

Since then I've been ironing out some of the many wrinkles in my work on a continual search for book covers, and slowly putting together a proposal for a graphic novel about Red Indians (a few of the completed pages are shown on the left) which will, if all goes the way I plan, say as much about the current condition of the Social State as it will of the Indians' subjugation by the white man.

A further ambition of mine is to become a novelist, and to direct a movie or two just like that other rather splendid chap Clive Barker."

As he mentions, Steve is looking for more professional work. SKELETON CREW is eager to pass on serious enquiries to him and also to preview the artwork of other horror artists.

BY

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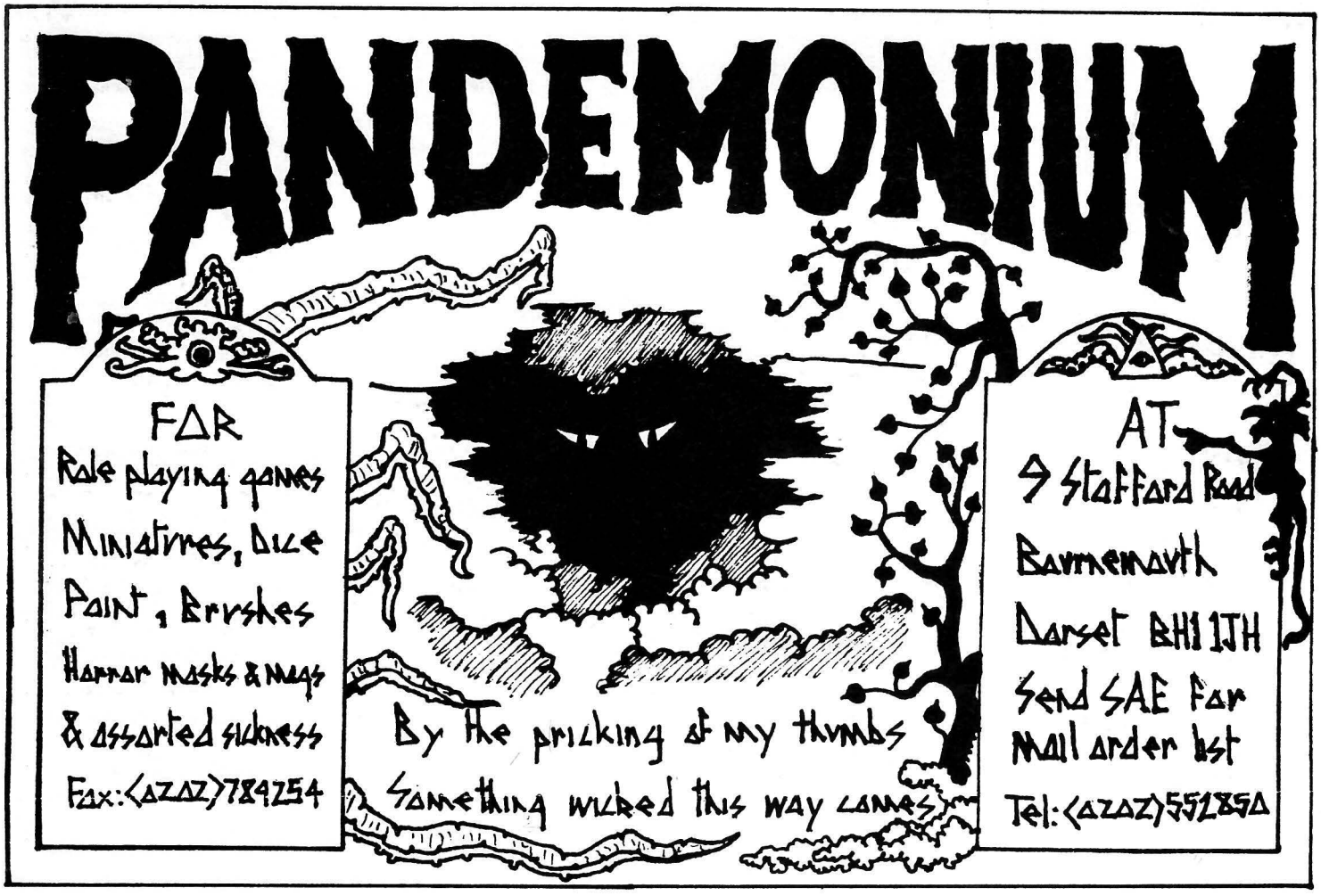

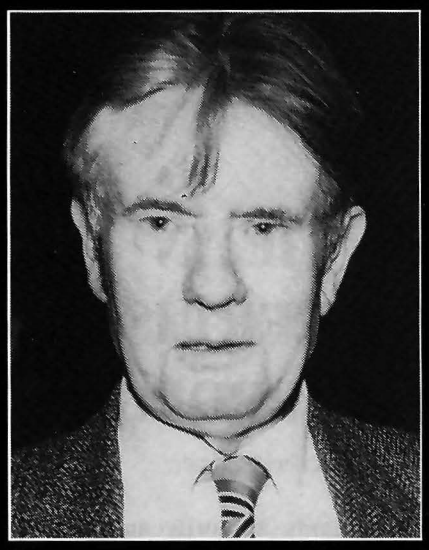

PHOTOGRAPHS: Peter Colebourne

A Walk on the Dark Side

R. Chetwynd-Hayes is one of Britain's most prolific horror writers. *A Walk On The Dark Side* is his first new short story for some time, written specifically for *Skeleton Crew*.

A wife can play many roles. Cook, housekeeper, companion, bed-fellow, mother, gardener, interior and exterior decorator, window-cleaner and, on (hopefully) rare occasions, husband-killer. Of course, such a nice, beautiful, well-bred wife like Mary would not be so crude as to think of herself as a husband killer. And, as for murder, I very much doubt if such a word could be found in her entire vocabulary. Husband *removing* maybe. Putting down for his own good; necessary vaporizing; erasure; helping into a better world; I rather like that, and I'm sure Mary does also. She is a kind person at heart and would try to convince herself she was doing me a favour.

I first became aware of my graveward journey when I trod on a bar of pink toilet soap that had been placed so conveniently on the top stair, so that when I went hurtling forward I hit that part of the banisters that had been skillfully weakened by an expert.

I recognized Leslie Bromley's work at once. He's very good with his hands and should have been a carpenter, but of course his snobbish mother insisted he work hard for little money so he could rise to the exalted height of Railway Executive.

My best friend and my ever loving wife was a combination guaranteed to loosen the most obstinate bowel and create nightmares in the most well-organized brain. My journey down the stairs and through the banisters did not fulfill their fondest hopes, but I landed on the hall carpet with a broken leg and several cracked ribs.

How Mary wept over me, kissed and fondled me so that I trembled like a sinful man on judgement day and begged to be told what I must do to make her really happy! She explained with a soft lilting voice and hands that were never still.

"Henry, I love you very much and will be very sad if — or when — something dreadful happens to you. But, you see, although I love you very much, I have come to love dear Leslie even more and he — well — he thinks I'm the most lovely, adorable person to walk the earth and that I'm very bedworthy into the bargain. He really is a most silly boy." She blushed and looked so young and innocent that I began to wonder if that bar of soap hadn't slid onto the top stair all by itself. But Mary was kind enough to explain even further. "Of course, being nice and conventional people we want to get married so as not to live in dreadful sin, but you are so against divorce."

"I might be talked into a change of heart," I suggested. Mary shook her lovely blonde head and bared her white even teeth in a dazzling smile.

"I doubt that. I honestly do. You've got such a conscience. My gosh! An awful active conscience. You'd change your mind in no time at all. Me — and darling Leslie — we've no conscience worth worrying about."

"But I . . ."

"Then there's the insurance. My word — an awful lot of money! I'm sorry, Henry, but you're worth so much more dead than alive."

Her glorious grey eyes told me she was enjoying this little exchange and, should I repeat it to a third party, those same eyes would widen with outraged astonishment and she would, furthermore, weep real tears for my insanity.

Next day, Leslie visited me all by himself and, on his knees, begged me to believe he had no wish to harm me, that he was still my best friend but that he could not help loving Mary, even while knowing she could never be his, unless — may the Good Lord forbid — some dreadful disaster removed me from the vineyard or whatever field of endeavour I happened to be toiling in when death went on the rampage.

My leg healed. I returned home. Mary insisted I spend the next week in a wheelchair. She took me for long trips along the river bank. She pushed me — and the wheelchair — into the river. Not being able to swim, I drowned. As I went down for the third time, I could see Mary weeping piteously on the river bank. I knew then she would make a beautiful widow.

"Love and hate did not die with the flesh, but blended together, becoming one new created emotion that gave the soul a strange kind of life."

When I returned to what could be described as consciousness, I was back in my own house and instantly became aware that Mary was explaining to two plain clothes policemen that she was fully responsible for my untimely death and she would never — but never — forgive herself.

"I should never," she explained tearfully, "have allowed him to talk me into wheeling him along the river bank. I should have realised that my poor little arms lacked the strength to stop that heavy chair from sliding down the bank, particularly when dear Henry insisted on pushing the wheels forward, saying he wanted to die, leaving me free to marry Leslie. As though I could ever love anyone but him!"

"Sort of 'assisted suicide'," one detective murmured and I could see that Mary thought he was coarse. The other one played his side of the record.

"Come off it, Charlie. There's no way she could hold that chair back once it had gone over the edge. The bank's steep thereabouts."

"Yeah. I know. But how did the chair come to be over the edge?"

"Charlie, you don't listen. The lady has explained. The dear departed pulled the right wheel over to the right, making it go over the edge. Could happen to anyone."

Mary clearly thought it was about time she made an at least token protest, but I could see she was half scared out of her young life, seeing that authority seemed to be entertaining dire suspicions as to how I had come to my watery end. Well, an end to regular breathing, although otherwise I seemed to be alive — aware of my surroundings, gifted with sight and hearing. But not the slightest sign of a body. A mere speck of consciousness that floated some six feet above ground level. Life of a kind. Better than oblivion which quite frankly was all I had ever expected.

The two men got up, Mary remained seated. The elder — the one who played the role of nasty policeman — said softly, "Opinions don't go very far with our superiors or the public prosecutor, so maybe we won't be back. But I tell you, young lady, your pretty face notwithstanding, there's a little man in my stomach who won't give me any peace. He will insist you pushed that poor bugger of a husband over the river bank, then sat back and watched while he choked his life away."

"You're an awful man," Mary stated tearfully,"and I'm going to complain."

"You do that. Yeah, I'd say you should complain about the awful copper who knows bloody well . . . "

"That's enough, Charlie," the nice policeman said. Then they both nodded to Mary and the nasty one said, "We'll let ourselves out. You sit there and have a good worry. Think, if your dear departed hubby still exists in some form or the other, he must hate your guts and if it's at all possible, he'll come back to do you dirt."

They left, and I came to rest a few feet above Mary and listened to her sobbing — not, I fear, from grief at my passing, but because the nasty policeman had upset her. Strange, but although my wife could commit murder and be completely untouched by the pangs of conscience, she was extremely sensitive. A harsh word, a frown, a hostile silence; any could reduce her to tears and rob her of sleep until peace had been restored. She spoke aloud.

"Henry, I know you've gone to a better world." Yes, that was her only comforting thought. She had sent me to a better world. I tried to speak, too. "No, I'm not. I'm right here. And I intend to give you hell!" But although I could *think* the words, I seemed to lack the ability to *speak* them: in fact everything seemed to be one-sided. I could see and hear Mary, but I was invisible and silent to her. An atom of consciousness afloat in eternity.

I drifted very slowly downwards until I was a few inches from her face, gazing into those clear blue-grey eyes, trying to see the soul which must reside somewhere back in the brain. Alas, only eyes much magnified and awash with tears. I thought-shouted, "Murdering bitch!" before being hurtled back in a storm of impotent rage. Back and forth across the room, until I either willed myself to a halt or bumped into a particularly solid surface.

Rage faded; curiosity — always a besetting sin so far as I was concerned — demanded its due and I began to experiment, willing myself up to the ceiling, then down to the floor; sinking into thick carpet pile; shrinking to an atom of awareness in a vast red, blue and amber forest where minute insect life became visible to my special vision. Then I streaked up again and — by now greatly daring — slid into Mary's left eye: swam in a grey-blue lake until I reached a red shore and was permitted to float into the dimly lit interior of Mary's mind.

One might expect me to describe a fearsome place where the spectre of a red-handed monster shrieked over slime-coated rocks and roaring creatures raised sightless heads to a fire-tinted sky. Not a bit of it. A boring plain that seemingly stretched out to a far distant horizon; swirling dust-devils that danced a slow quadrille before collapsing into a rippling sea; a cold wind that consisted of gusty sighs and the occasional gasping cry. I made for the command post, the steps hewn out of pink rock — or some substance that looked very like it — and, after climbing them,

eventually entered a small chamber with what looked like pork — or possible veal — walls. They glistened with moisture (maybe water — diluted blood), and as the floor heaved slightly I was grateful for my disembodied state, for I am certain solid feet would have sunk into that dark brown morass.

I could see out of two blue-grey windows and looked upon the room where I had leapt from floor to ceiling but a few seconds before, prior to entering Mary's eyes. Was she aware, I wondered, that I possessed her? Presumably not, for the body was displaying no signs of panic; the white well-shaped hands were moving, fingers interlacing, the left thumb caressing the left palm — just under the fingers. But this had always been so. Hands that were never still, restless fingers, caressing thumbs.

But — and what a wonderful thought — I had not *really* taken possession yet. Not taken over completely. Making myself felt. I was still capable of emotion. *Rage* I had already experienced, now I basked in a warm glow of *joy.* I even performed a kind of astral dance, round and round that meat-walled chamber, springing up from the offal floor to bounce off a lamp chop ceiling, before bursting out of the eyes and drifting across the room to a blind-shaded window.

Now there could be no doubt: Mary was alarmed. The lovely eyes were wide open, the full lips slightly parted as though in preparation for the release of a scream, and at that moment I love-hated her as never before in my flesh-and-blood life. Love and hate did not die with the flesh, but blended together, becoming one new created emotion that gave the soul a strange kind of life.

I watched the trembling shoulders, the startled eyes, the agitated hands, while the need for revenge forced a silent cry from my immortal being that streaked out across the vast emptiness of time space. Then she wept, cried actual tears, as indeed she had before when I first gazed into her eyes, but now they were tears of fear.

The door bell sent its chimes through the house and I shrank down into the carpet, trying to blot out my awareness, but curiosity and the new emotion made from love-hate would not allow me to rest and I rose up in time to see Leslie enter the room. They kissed. Lord of love-hate-right-wrong-cursed-be-forever-damned — they kissed. A terrible embrace that pressed lips to lips, breasts to torso, thighs to thighs, lust to lust, until the burning need to penetrate, accept, take, give, rend, became one . . .

I had never experienced the power which had made them commit and condone murder, made them risk their very existence so that they could be together, with no one — no ridiculous little demanding turd — getting in the way, demanding a share of a prize he could not possibly appreciate.

Merciful God, *pain* had not died with the flesh, either; I experienced that soul-searing agony that is usually reserved for those who have been fathered by the gods, and with it came a need to empty the cup of vengeance to its final, butter dregs. I followed them to the bedroom, watched Leslie denude that lovely body (much as a housewife removes the coarse leaves of a cabbage so as to get to the fresh tender substance beneath), then allowed her pleasure seeking hands to expose his white skin, his rampant manhood — and suddenly I knew the road to vengeance ran between golden fields. It took me the best part of half an hour to learn — understand — but it proved to be time well spent.

Firstly, I took my one-time friend under full control and enjoyed to the utmost the glorious betrayer — murderess — who gróaned and gasped beneath him-me; then I entered her, wandered in the feminine fields and came to realise they were not so different to those reserved for man. But Lord Satan, a lifetime of frustration burst its banks, and I do believe I could have killed them both with the one and only way of unendurable pleasure — but that was not my intention.

When both lay in a state of complete exhaustion I entered the female, took up my position in the meat-wall chamber and looked out of her blue-grey eyes. He, Leslie, false friend, murderer by intent, smiled weakly and said, "You look positively ferocious, love. I could liken your glorious eyes to those of a tigress."

Mary's essence knew I was there; I could feel her seething all around me, trying to regain control but not knowing how, while I used her vocal cords to good effect.

"Do I? Perhaps you are looking at a tiger that has gotten himself into the wrong cage."

His lips curved into an obscene smirk. "After the performance you have just put up, I'm inclined to think you might be right. Perhaps murder is the ultimate aphrodisiac."

In Mary's softest tone, I said, "You are a monster, aren't you?"

"But the kind of monster you like."

I made her lips perform a seductive smile. "How lovingly kind you are. Tell me, did you like Henry?"

I watched the cloud pass over his face, the brief flash in his eyes, and knew the cold wind of apprehension was sending its whimpering cry along the corridors of his brain. Still, his voice was calm. "I liked him well enough. A contemptuous liking maybe, but normally I would not have wished him harm."

"His lips curved into an obscene smirk. 'After the performance you have just put up, I'm inclined to think you might be right. Perhaps murder is the ultimate aphrodisiac.'"

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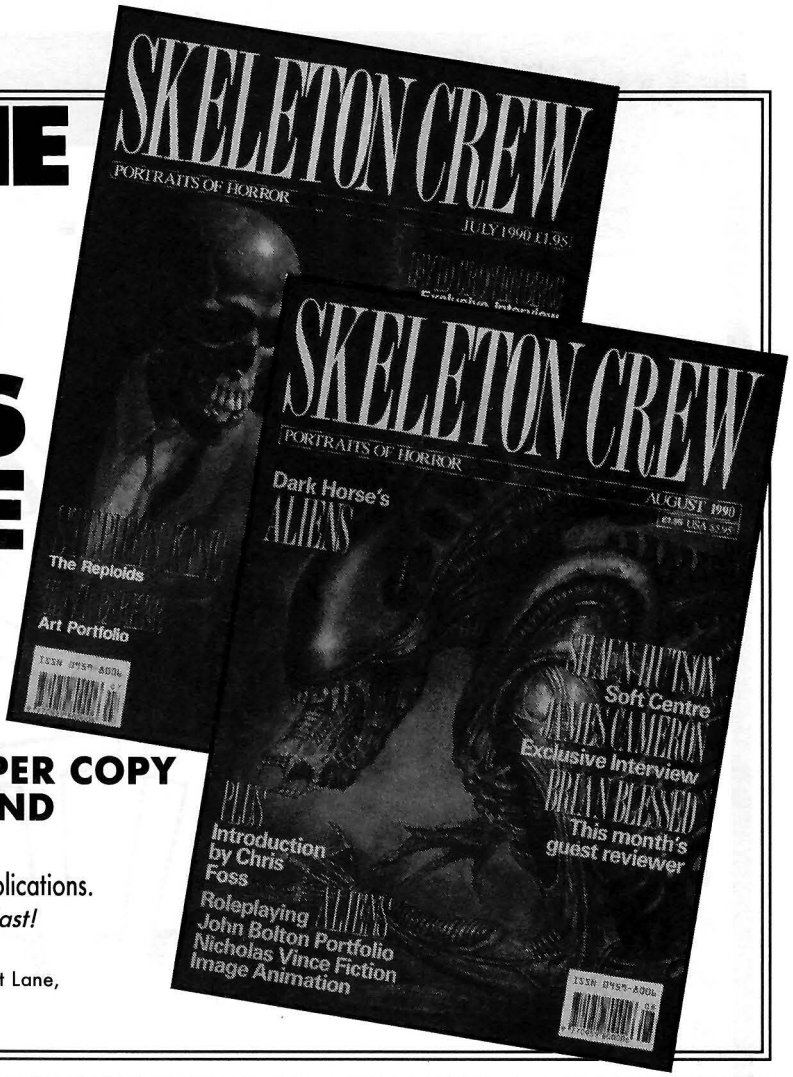

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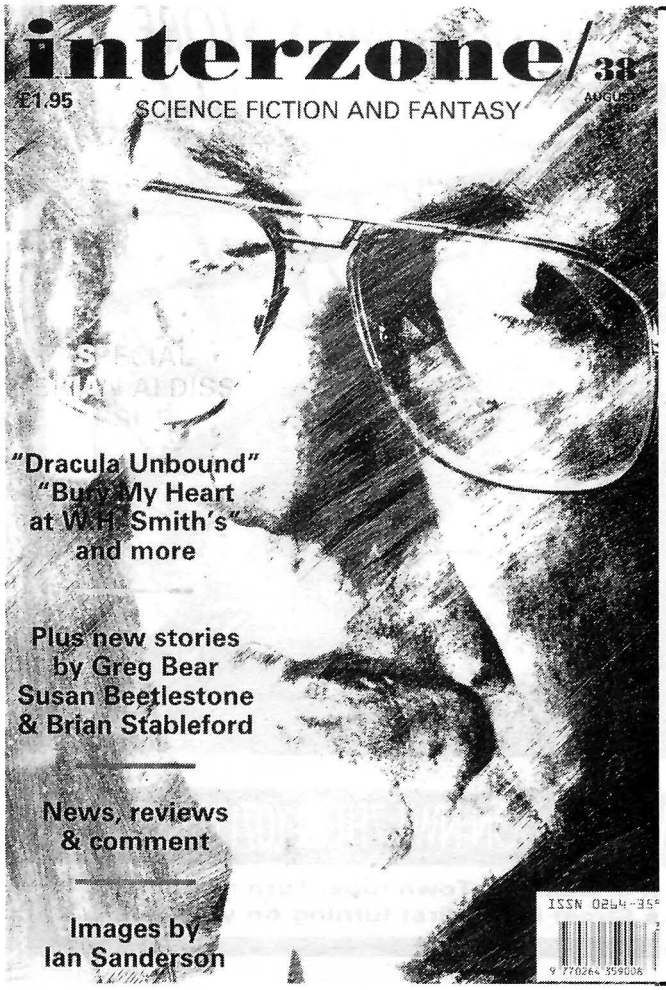

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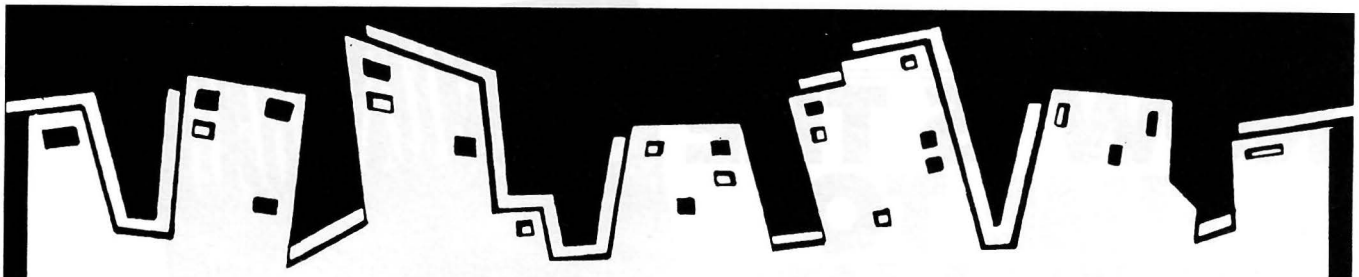

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"But you were willing to allow me — to remove him?"

He shrugged, and I wondered how long it would take for the cold wind of apprehension to reach gale force. "What's come over you? We got away with it, didn't we? An unfortunate accident. And Hell, we did *warn* Henry. Fairs fair. We did warn him."

It was my turn to shrug. "The sickness called love blinds and deafens and strips the sufferer of all defence. The poor fool all but kissed the hands that pushed the wheelchair over the river bank."

"Well," Leslie spoke with easy assurance, "he's gone to that land from which no one returns."

Mary's lips now assumed a grim smile. "I wouldn't swear to that. Not by any means."

"You are becoming morbid. Really, you worry me. Now is not the time for you to become all fanciful. You and I don't merely *love*, we *exist* for each other. The sins of one must be the sins of the other."

I again spoke with Mary's voice. "But suppose there is a law that demands retribution? The victim is guaranteed vengeance?"

He began to laugh. A prolonged, rumbling laugh. My anger grew so that I forgot my original intention to retain rigid control and not to reveal my continued existence until he had been carefully prepared. Mary's voice grew deeper — more masculine — and I forced it to shout.

"Laugh . . . laugh . . . but be assured the woman would scream to high Heaven if she were able! She's trying to break through meat-lined walls!"

He slid from the bed and backed to the door, his face slowly assuming an expression that portrayed horrified astonishment. Words dribbled from his lax lips. "You've cracked! My God! You're crawling up the wall!"

I sensed the germ of purpose that was coming into being — kill the woman less her deranged brain make her tongue wag, and I could see his eyes moving from side to side looking for some object that could be used as an instrument of murder. But I was nearer to the heavy bedside lamp and I heard the plug leave the socket, the woman's screaming voice in her-my head, for she knew how this must end. Then I was transforming that hated face into blood-drenched ruin; splintering bone, snarling, kicking, truly alive as never before in my entire existence.

Then it was over, bloody vengeance complete and, after permitting the woman's body to move, forced it to take up the telephone receiver and dial the local police station. For the last time I spoke with her voice. "This is Mrs. Mary Smith of 23, Winslow Drive. You may be interested to know I have just killed my lover, Leslie George Bromley. This is my second murder. I'd be obliged if you would send along the two officers who investigated my husband's death."

Then I took her back to the bed and made her gaze upon the corpse that was looking more ugly by the second, and did not vacate her body until the door bell rang.

Mary did not move, so the two men had to find their own way in — through a window, I believe — and presently ambled into the bedroom. The one called Charlie — the nasty one — shook his head as though in sad reproach. "Naughty. Trying to corner the market? I must say you did a good job."

Mary tried to explain, to tell the truth as she understood it. "It wasn't me. It was my husband, Henry. He got into my head and made me . . . my body do it.

Charlie looked at his companion. "You've got to hand it to her. I mean, having bumped off the husband, she then blames him for bumping off the boy friend! That's class — real class."

The nice policeman shook his head even more sadly. "You don't get it, Charlie. She's trying to let us know she's round the bend, bonkers, up the pole."

"You don't say so!"

"Sure. I mean, if she can convince the Chief Super and a few head shrinkers, there'll be no trial. Just a nice comfy room in the looney bin."

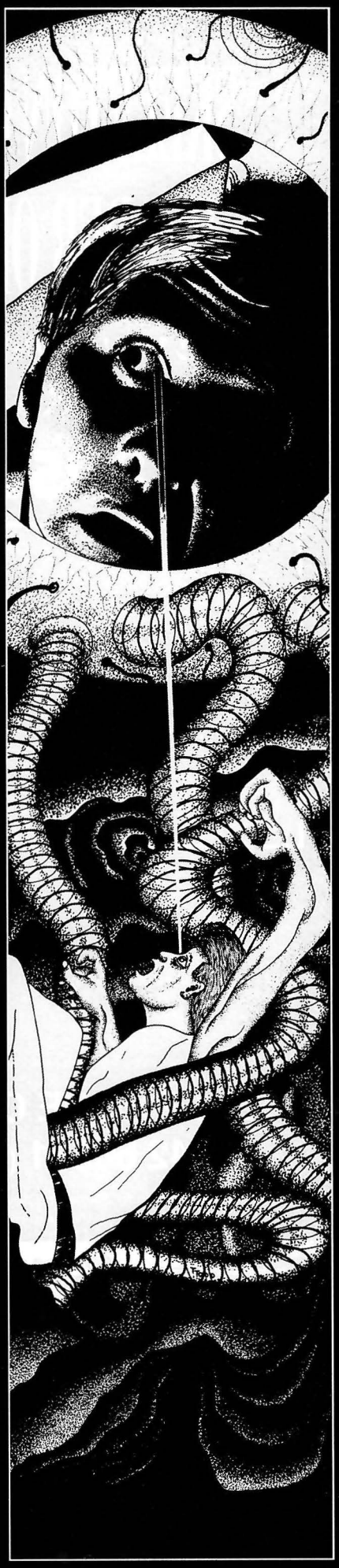
Charlie leaned down and looked into Mary's eyes. He spoke very softly: "Not on your proverbial nelly. Not a hope in Hell. Let's take her down to the station."

The nice policeman nodded agreement. "Yeah, let's do that.

At the doorway, Charlie stopped and looked back over one shoulder. Then he said, "You poor bugger, if you had anything to do with . . . But no — that's impossible. But if you *are* hanging about, relax. Call it a day. We'll take over from now on."

After they had gone I drifted out into the street and looked for the last time at the world I had known, then rose slowly up towards the cloudless sky.

I had started the long journey to the stars.



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BEVERLY HILLS VAMP

'Is that a stake in your pocket, or are you just pleased to see me?' Yes, the old gags are the best, and there's plenty of 'em in this low-rent Fred Olen Ray extravaganza shot a couple of years back and now making an unfortunate recovery on video. The plot — if you could call it that — concerns a trio of nerdish teens who come to Hollywood to persuade a fast-buck producer to stump up the backing for 'a meaningful love story'. When they discover the aforesaid huckster is more interested in a project called '*Motorcycle Sluts From Hell*' ('Now THAT's a love story,' he says), they decide to cheer themselves up by visiting a local house of ill repute, presided over the very svelte (and presumably hard-up to accept a job in this) Britt Ekland.

It turns out that Britt and her three toothsome working girls are actually vampire hookers, and they quickly put the bite on two of the lads. But the most nerdish of their number (Eddie Deezen) manages to escape and enlist the help of the film producer and a 'B' movie exorcist (played by former Count Yorga, Robert Quarry) to rescue his pals and deliver a few well placed stakes to the tarts. Those familiar with Fred's other work will know exactly what to expect. Most of it was shot in and around Fred's own home, with Fred's wife Dawn Wildsmith doing a cameo as a dozy secretary. The film's brief running time is padded out with tacked-on sequences involving the flabby Quarry delivering Carry-On style double-entendres while getting a rubdown from a sexy masseuse. And there's an opening credit narration reminiscent of the worst of Ed Wood Jr. Fans of scantily clad ladies and/or faded 'B' movie performers might like to give this bloodless spoof the once-over. Others should stay well clear.

BEVERLEY HILLS VAMP (18)
New World Video
Produced and Directed by Fred Olen Ray
Starring Eddie Deezen, Britt Ekland,
Robert Quarry, Dawn Wildsmith
Running Time: 73 minutes

SHOCKER

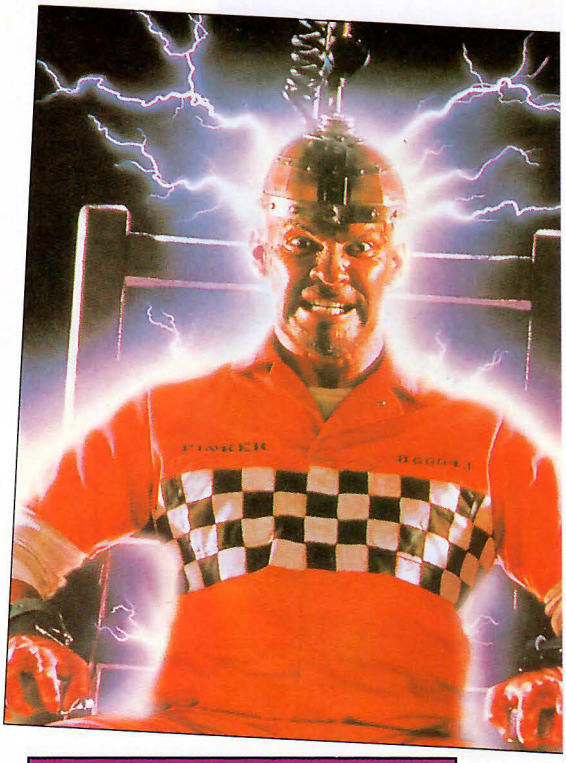
Having created Elm Street's Freddy, cult writer/director Wes Craven tries for an encore (and a new franchise), bringing us the misadventures of horrible Horace Pinker (Mitch Pileggo), a psychotic TV repairman who loves to slice 'n' dice entire families just for the hell of it. Bald-headed serial killer Pinker is the subject of a massive manhunt led by determined detective Michael Murphy, but in the end it is Murphy's psychic stepson (Peter Berg) who witnesses Pinker's grisly handiwork in a dream and manages to lead the cops directly to his door.

However, while the stunned viewer is still trying to digest this most unlikely plot twist, Pinker manages to evade capture just long enough to slaughter our hero's girlfriend (Cami Cooper). Then, when he's *finally* pinned down in the electric chair, he manages to survive execution and acquire the ability to invade any electrical system — from the human nervous system to a television broadcast. 'No more Mr Nice Guy,' he jests as he sets out to extract a grisly revenge . . .

There are some intriguing ideas here, but unfortunately they never amount to much in Craven's mish-mash of a script. Instead, the movie comes across as a dog-eared hybrid of many other recent genre flicks (the body-swapping concept was carried out with considerably more razzle-dazzle in Jack Shoulder's THE HIDDEN, and the electric chair motif turned up in both PRISON and HOUSE 3 — THE HORROR SHOW), put together in a surprisingly slapdash manner for a director of Craven's proven ability.

Here the many dream sequences that are now Craven's trademark become merely tiresome, especially when the hero's dead girlfriend turns up for a slushy blood-stained reunion. But the clincher is the final sequence where Horace and Jonathan battle it out on the TV airwaves, Jonathan changing channels and using the video fast-forward and freeze button to beat the stuffing out of his adversary. Craven promised his fans an industrial strength horror movie, but this sure isn't it. Come back Freddy, all is forgiven.

Reviews by Mark Lewis



SHOCKER (18)
Guild Home Video
Written and Directed by Wes Craven
Starring Peter Berg, Michael Murphy,
Mitch Pileggi, Cami Cooper
Running Time: 110 minutes
Music by William Goldstein
Photography by Mac Ahlberg

Most horror fans just dream of the day they can direct their own movie. But GREMLINS 2: THE NEW BATCH director Joe Dante has managed to turn that dream into reality. Mark Lewis meets the top-rated American filmmaker for a SKELETON CREW exclusive.

When Joe Dante was just thirteen years old he contributed a long list of the worst horror movies he had ever seen to FAMOUS MONSTERS OF FILMLAND magazine. To his great surprise, they published it under the title of *DANTE'S INFERNO*. Nowaday's the softly spoken 44 year-old New Yorker is making his own movies rather than writing about them. His impressive list of credits include such seminal genre flicks as THE HOWLING, PIRANHA, INNERSPACE and GREMLINS. And this month he brings us GREMLINS 2 : THE NEW BATCH, a movie which he describes as 'EXECUTIVE SUITE with Gremlins, because it takes place in a New York skyscraper . . .'

Dante had always wanted to set the GREMLINS sequel in New York and in the very first treatment of the script (concocted by Monty Python's Terry Jones a few years back). The film even had a Bernard Goetz type vigilante Gremlin riding shotgun on the subway. It ended with a giant Gizmo battling a giant Gremlin in the centre of NYC, knocking over skyscrapers Godzilla-style. 'But it wasn't producable' sighs Dante. 'Terry's script was too irreverent for the powers-that-be at Warner Bros, who have come to look upon these little creatures as sacrosanct.'

In the end it was decided to go with the current scenario of having the mischievous little creatures take over a vast skyscraper belonging to a Donald Trump type tycoon. Budget restrictions dictated that the Gremlins didn't get out into the city, because, Dante says, 'that's another $40 million movie, and we didn't have enough money left! Most of the time it's a threat movie — how will they prevent the Gremlins from getting loose in the city?'

When you ask most filmmakers about their idols, the names Hitchcock, Bergman, Welles or Chaplin usually figure top of the list. In Dante's case though, we're talking Chuck Jones and Fritz Freleng, the Warner cartoonists who created THE ROAD RUNNER and BUGS BUNNY. This long term affection for loony tunes cartoons colours all of Dante's pictures, from the crazy antics of the Gremlins to the kids in EXPLORERS meeting up with the wackiest pot-bellied aliens ever seen in the movies.

An aspiring cartoonist himself at one time, Dante dropped out of art school to make a seven hour compilation film called THE MOVIE ORGY, which was spliced together from 1950s monster flicks like KRONOS and THE GIANT CLAW. A few years later this served as his CV for a job at New World Pictures, Roger Corman's low-budget film factory, where along with Allan (HEARTBEEPS) Arkush he was given a job putting together trailers for dreadful Fillipino imports. 'Basically it was what you didn't show that was important,' he says with a chuckle. 'If a picture was made on a low budget with lousy sound, then you wouldn't want any dialogue in the trailer. If it was badly photographed then you had a real problem — we got around that by using opticals and animation, and scenes from other movies!'

Eventually Dante and Arkush constructed an entire movie from such stock shots. The legendary HOLLYWOOD BOULEVARD (available on Warner Video) told of a star-struck young actress (Candace Rialson) who was pursued by a psychotic killer through a maze of 'found footage' from Corman pics like THE BIG DOLL'S HOUSE and DEATH RACE 2000. 'Roger was impressed,' said Dante, 'because HOLLYWOOD BOULEVARD was cheap even by his standards! In fact he has just finished HOLLYWOOD BOULEVARD II, which as far as I can see is an exact shot-for-shot remake. I heard it turned out pretty well for a $25,000 movie!'

The pint-sized JAWS ripoff, PIRANHA (Warner Video) shot Dante into the major league, paving the way for even greater success with the special effectsful werewolf chiller THE HOWLING (Channel 5). Though a howling hit, the latter was eclipsed at the box office by John Landis's AN AMERICAN WEREWOLF IN LONDON. Dante explains how this happened in a slightly aggrieved tone. 'Well you see Rick Baker had been planning for years to make a picture with John Landis about werewolves. They had talked about it and talked about it and never done it. Finally when THE HOWLING came along, and we hired Rick Baker to do the werewolf stuff. He must have figured, well I've been waiting for years to do a picture like this, so let's do it . . .'

'At this point John Landis called him up and said "How could you make a werewolf picture for those guys when you said you'd make one for me?" Rick said "But you aren't making one!" Landis said "Yes I am, as of today." And so Rick went off to make AMERICAN WEREWOLF and we used Rob Bottin instead, who I must add did a splendid job. Our picture was made first, but we missed the Halloween deadline for release and so we put it back and it ended up coming out about the same time as the Landis movie.'

A lifelong fan of the horror and science-fiction genres, Dante likes to fill his movies with little in-jokes, like having the cheapskate Corman fishing for loose change in a phone booth in one scene in THE HOWLING. 'That's the most indulgent in-joke I ever did' he admits, 'and it was only because I had the urge to make Roger work for me for nothing! Everything else I've tried to put into the margins. I don't really consider them in-jokes. I just consider them jokes.' Dante's first major studio movie was to have been the Steven Spielberg-produced GREMLINS. But it took so long to get the script into shape that in the meantime he contracted to do one episode of the ill-fated TWILIGHT ZONE feature film. Dante's cartoonist short about a kid with devastating telepathic powers was based on Jerome Bixby's classic tale, IT'S A GOOD LIFE. It was a great deal of kudos, but as a whole the film was nowhere near the hit it was expected to be. 'The original concept' explains Dante, 'was that characters from one story would appear in another story, that there would be some kind of continuity to it. But the first person to do their episode was John Landis, and once there was the accident (an on-set helicopter crash which killed actor Vic Morrow and two young children) it all became very compartmentalised, and George Miller and I were left very much on our own to do our segments. I ended up shooting the end of George's episode as well, because he had gone back to Australia.'

As is the case with many other filmmakers, Dante likes to work with the same cast and crew on each new movie. The most regular members of his stock company include the great Dick Miller, a veteran of countless Corman cheapies, INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS star Kevin McCarthy, and composer Jerry Goldsmith, whose score for GREMLINS 2: THE NEW BATCH is one of the best of his long and distinguished career.

'It's very interesting how I ended up working with Jerry,' says Dante. 'Previously my scores had been done by Pino Donnagio. He would spot the movie and he would go off to Italy and write the music and send it to me — we couldn't afford to go there! I would get the music back, listen to it, and lay it in where it was appropriate. But you never really got to consult while he was writing it or conducting it or anything. I sort of inherited Jerry because he had just done POLTERGEIST for Steven, and he came along as part of the TWILIGHT ZONE package. We just hit it off very well, and I've used him for every picture since. I'm sure you noticed he did a guest appearance in the first movie (he's the silver-haired guy in a phone booth at the inventor's convention), and he's got a line of dialogue in GREMLINS 2, so he's going up in the world.'

"'I guess the bad luck began when I turned down the chance to make BATMAN' sighs Dante."

"Most of the time it's a threat movie — how will they prevent the Gremlins from getting loose in the city?"

Dante's first GREMLINS movie was a huge success, but it sat on the shelf for a while first, because the studio were not exactly sure what to do with it.

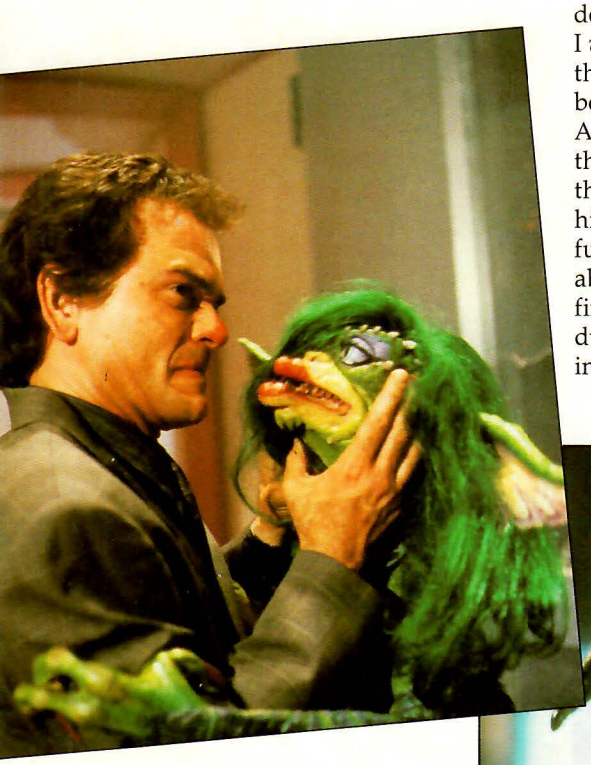
'Warner Brothers really didn't like the movie when they saw it' he says with a chuckle. 'They thought it was very weird and in bad taste. They were astonished at the preview — as I admit I was astonished — because the audience reaction was so incredible. I mean, they were like on the ceiling, these people! One of the reasons Warner found it so difficult to make the sequel was that they really didn't understand the first movie at all, and basically kept trying for six years to make an imitation of it. I don't think there is really much market for an imitation because other people have done it with movies like CRITTERS. What we were trying to do with GREMLINS 2 is make a completely different kind of picture, and I think we've succeeded.'

One pleasant surprise is to see Dick Miller back as the obnoxious Mr Futterman, who somehow survived being run over by a bulldozer in the first movie? 'He was very lucky . . . ' laughs Dante. 'Actually if you listen carefully in the last scene in the first picture, where people are watching television, there is an announcer who says he is talking with Murray Futterman at Mercy Hospital. We put that in at the last minute because he really had been too nice a character to kill off. Anyway, in the new picture he's out of the hospital and he's a little jumpy whenever Gremlins are mentioned. He undergoes sort of a transformation when he realises he wasn't crazy after all.'

Also back are Phoebe Cates and Zack Galligan, joined by the usual lineup of Dante accentrics like Robert Prosky as an Al Lewis type horror host, and veteran Hammer star Christopher Lee. The film seems certain to be a major hit, ending a spell of bad luck that had plagued Dante in recent years and only took a slight upturn with the middling success of the sci-fi comedy INNERSPACE (Warner).

'I guess the bad luck began when I turned down the chance to make BATMAN' sighs Dante. 'I almost did it, but I woke up one night and realised I actually didn't believe in BATMAN. So I went along to the powers-that-be at Warner and told them. "This is wrong. You can't have someone doing this movie who doesn't believe in Batman." I was responding to the black humour and all that stuff, but when it came right down to Bruce Wayne I just didn't buy it. They told me of course that I was wrong, that I *was* the right guy but just confused or something. Eventually I managed to convince them that you just can't put a movie like this in the hands of someone who doesn't believe in the premise.' Instead he got involved in directing some segments of AMAZON WOMEN OF THE MOON (CIC), a misfire spoof of exploitation cinema that bombed badly at the box office. 'There was a lot better movie in there than got on the screen' maintains Dante. 'John Landis was the producer, and insisted that all of his sequences stayed in, while a lot of other people's had to go. There were some very funny things that didn't get in there: I did a wonderful sequence with Dick Miller about a ventriloquist who picks his dummy out and goes on the stage in Las Vegas and finds that in Paris his dummy has gotten switched up with a French dummy and his dummy only speaks French. It was really funny, but John Landis claimed it was 'too intellectual' and cut it out.'

Dante also got egg on his face with EXPLORERS (CIC), an underrated sci-fi yarn

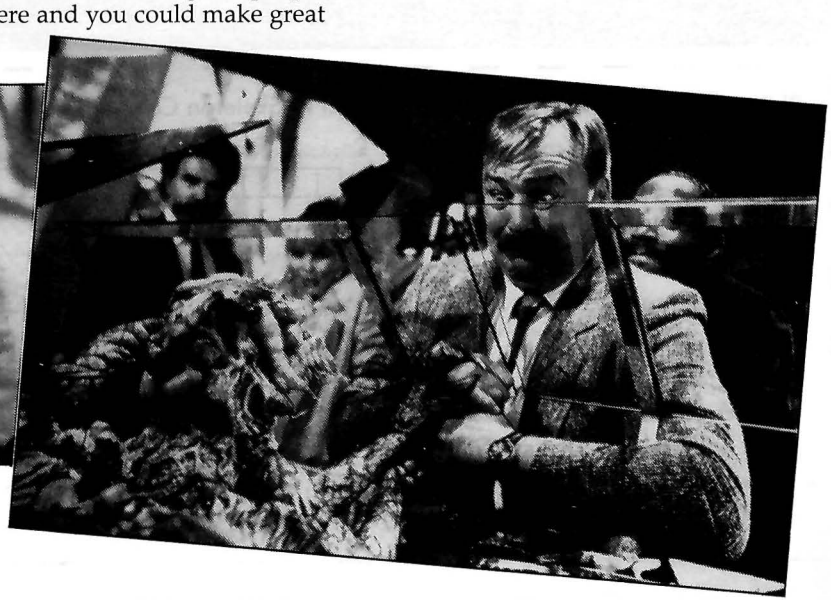


"Now that GREMLINS 2 is finished, Dante intends to take a long rest. 'Communism fell while I was working on this movie' he says with a grin, 'people were born and cast in the film . . .'"

about a trio of moppets who travel through space in a 'force bubble' and have a very odd close encounter with some off-the-wall aliens designed by Rob Bottin. 'I inherited that movie from Wolfgang Pederson. He wanted to make it in Bavaria. But the Paramount people had just seen Pederson's NEVERENDING STORY and they didn't believe that Bavaria could convincingly stand in for middle-America. So they and Wolfgang parted company and they sent the script to me instead.'

'The problem was it had no ending. The kids went to another planet and they played baseball with some aliens and they went home. And it just didn't seem to me to be quite enough. We also had to rush to get it into cinemas in time for the agreed release date, so it really didn't get finished properly. I'm not so sure that even if I'd been allowed to finish it it would have been a successful movie, because the problem appeared to be that when people got to the alien part they just got terminally disappointed. It sets you up to discover the secrets of the universe, and whatever you get is bound to be a disappointment.' The same sort of problem plagued the script of THE 'BURBS, a madcap Tom Hanks comedy set in the suburbs about nosy neighbours causing chaos. The oddball climax didn't live up to the audience's expectations, but it was fun nevertheless. 'It was a movie that was made during the writers strike' points out Dante, 'and most of the funniest stuff was improvised by the actors themselves. Hanks in particular is wonderful to work with. He has so much talent.'

Now that GREMLINS 2 is finished, Dante intends to take a long rest. 'Communism fell while I was working on this movie' he says with a grin, 'people were born and cast in the film . . . ' But he loves his work too much to spend a lot of time away from it. 'I guess I'm a lucky guy to be working at such a great job' he says, 'I was watching a James Cagney movie the other night and Cagney got out of a taxi cab right across the street from my office on the Warner lot. It's kind of an eerie thrill, knowing that people have made great movies there and you're standing there and you could make great movies too. That's all I want to do.'



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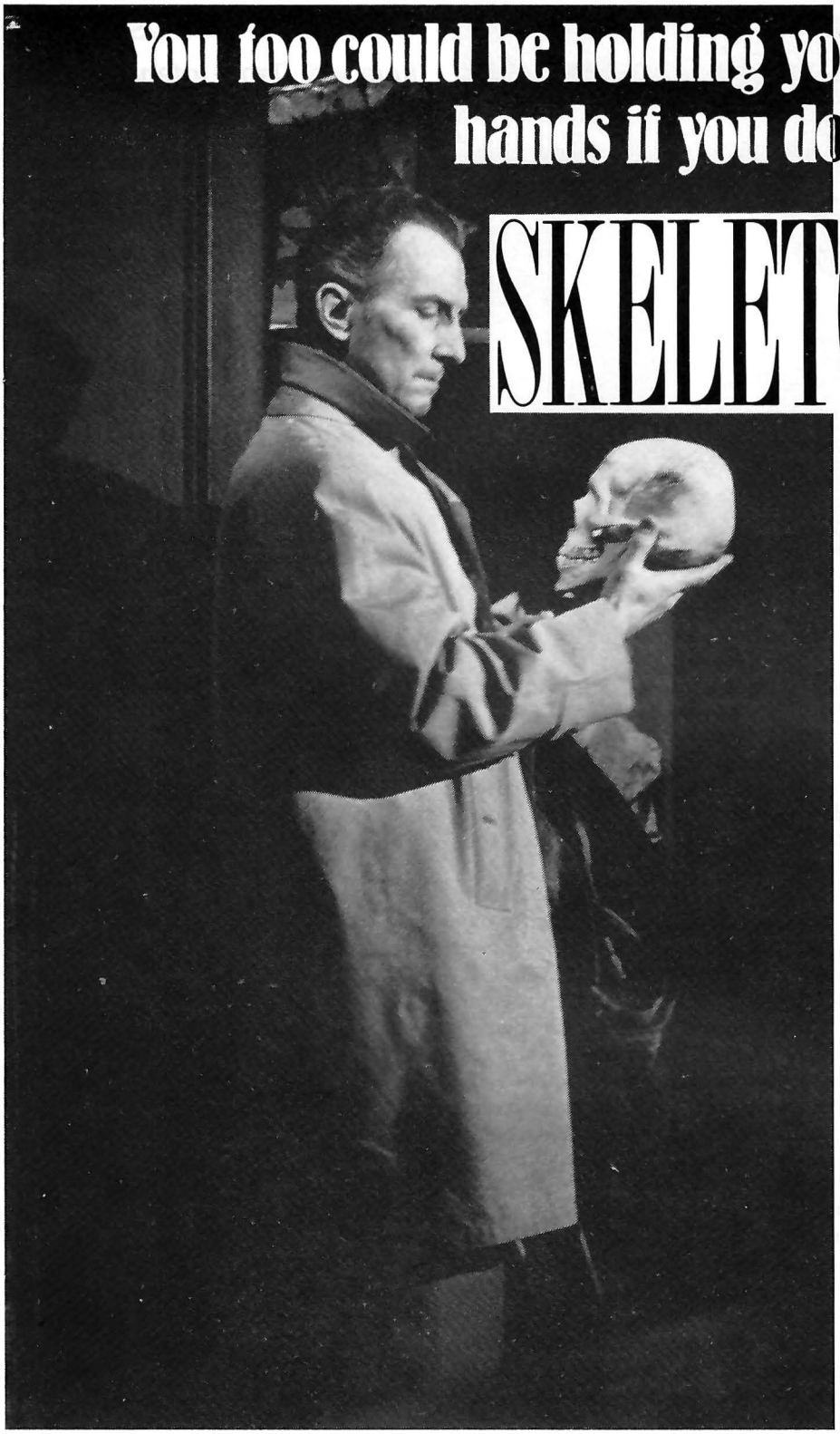

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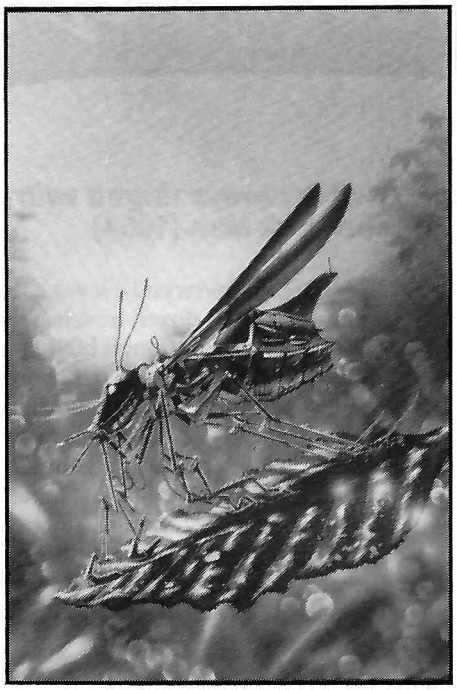

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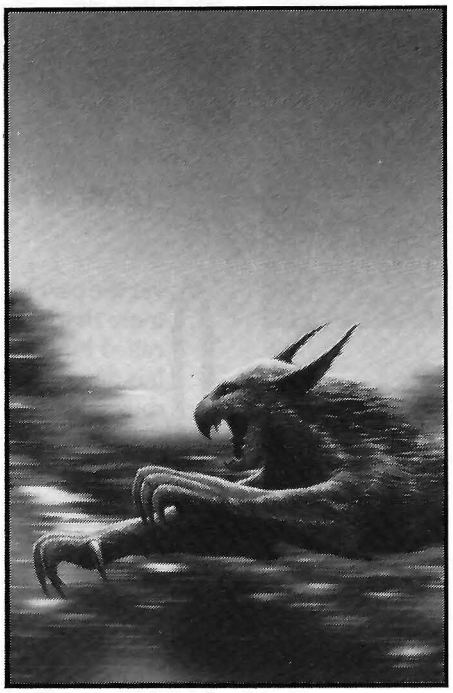

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LIGHTNING MAN

"Fear of the Unknown is always tinged with curiosity"
— The Dark Man (1964)

Britain's main continuing contribution to the history of horror has been the ghost story. And, as Stephen Jones and Jo Fletcher describe, there is only one current ghost story guy: Ron Chetwynd-Hayes.

Over the past twenty-five years, Ronald Chetwynd-Hayes has steadily turned out more than 200 short stories and around a dozen novels. One of his publishers called him "Britain's Prince of Chill" and, although bibliographer Mike Ashley has described his fiction as "variable", his volumes of ghost stories and humourous tales of terror fill the shelves of nearly every public library in Britain.

Given his prolific output, he ought to be a household name, as famous — or infamous — as those other masterful exponents of the genre: M.R. James, Robert Aickman, or newer practitioners such as Ramsey Campbell, James Herbert and Clive Barker. Instead, he lingers in relative obscurity working away in a house on the outskirts of London, surrounded by thousands of books, continuing to churn out his urbane nightmares on an old battered manual typewriter. Apart from a couple of brief forays into the limelight when his stories have been adapted for movie audiences, he remains ready by millions but known only to a few.

There is something warmly reassuring about the fantasy fiction of R. Chetwynd-Hayes. It is not simply that, almost singlehandedly, he is keeping alive the tradition of the typically British ghost story (which indeed he is), but when you dip into one of his collections you are transported back to a more genteel period of fantastic literature. Without doubt, it is this safe familiarity about his work that led to a string of successful hardcover collections published by William Kimber over the past few years, aimed almost exclusively at library sales. However, the languishing author has mixed feelings about his limited success: "Kimber was always very good to me," he explains. "I had to cater for the public library trade, which is really middle-aged ladies and they like a gentle ghost story. I don't regret that. I'd love to get into paperbacks again — that's where the real money is and, of course, you get mass readership there as well. Still, you probably get as many readers eventually through library editions: I was averaging 18,000 borrowings per book per year."

Much of Chetwynd-Hayes' considerable output may be prosaic and he is often justifiably criticised for allowing his sense of humour to intrude upon the narrative. Yet his skill as a writer lies in the outrageous monsters he concocts and his ability to add a new — usually quite nasty — twist to a familiar theme. Take, for example, this extract from one of his best stories, *The Jumpity-Jim*:

> *"The skin split while Lady Dunwilliam screamed and a tiny wizened head peeped out from its cocoon, like a chick about to emerge from its cracked egg. It was rather like a shrivelled, pink balloon and it jerked around to stare at Harriet with microscopic red eyes. The girl gave a hoarse cry and jerked her hand from Lad Dunwilliam's loosened grip, before tearing wildly across the room in an effort to escape. As she did so the woman was flung on to her face, while something went leaping up to the rafters, then down to the floor again. A black, pink-tinted something that moved so fast it was only a blur that streaked up and down across the room. With her back against the far wall, Harriet saw it zig-zagging towards her, coming forward with high leaps that carried it up to the rafters and down again; then there was a glimpse of that wizened, deflated face, the long pink body and four many-jointed legs, before she seized a nearby chair and hurled it straight at the approaching horror."*

Ronald Chetwynd-Hayes was born in Isleworth, West London, on May 30th (he is quaintly reluctant to reveal his age). After appearing as an extra in a number of pre-War British movies (notably the Robert Donat version of GOODBYE, MR. CHIPS (1939) he followed his Quartermaster Sergeant father into the Army at the start of World War II, rising to the dizzy rank (as he describes it) of Sergeant in the Middlesex Regiment. He was evacuated from Dunkirk, but returned to the beaches of France on D-Day.

When he came out of the Army after the War, writing was the last career he considered. Instead he landed a job as a trainee buyer in the furniture department of Har-

rods, the internationally famous London department store. After four and a half years he moved to an exclusive furniture emporium in select Berkeley Street as showroom manager.

All the time he was scraping a living at these mundane trades, Chetwynd-Hayes read voraciously, anything he could get his hands on, and he was firmly convinced he could do better himself. He began to churn out his own short stories, everything from romances to his personal favourite, historical fiction. He explains: "For years I wasted my time; I used to turn out stories that pleased me, then send them out to magazines . . . and they'd send them back." One day, while looking on a bookstall, he noticed the profusion of horror titles and promptly dashed off his own collection of short stories. "I thought I was clever," he says. "I sent one copy to Tandem Books and one to Hutchinson — and they were both accepted at the same time! So I told Hutchinson smugly, 'Don't worry, I've sold the paperback rights for you.'" But Hutchinson had their own softcover line, Arrow Books, and they told the overzealous writer that he'd better let Tandem keep the collection. "It's a shame," he laments, "I'd have liked to have been published by Hutchinson . . . " The book was THE UNBIDDEN and, although it had been accepted in just three days and was Chetwynd-Hayes' first commercial success, it was no overnight phenomenon: by the time it appeared in 1971, he already had two published novels behind him.

"I wrote all the time," he explains, "except when I was in the Army — because I didn't think I was going to come out. But I used to come home from the showroom and turn out short stories in the evenings." His first published work was THE MAN FROM THE BOMB, a science fiction novel that he is clearly embarrassed by and suggests is "put down to extreme youth." That was in 1959, and was published by the now-legendary paperback imprint Badger Books. "I sent that all over the place," admits Chetwynd-Hayes, "Badger offered to take it, so I let them have it. They paid me £25. After that came THE DARK MAN (1964), published by Sidgwick & Jackson — after 19 rejections, mark you."

THE DARK MAN is still regarded as one of Chetwynd-Hayes' finest achievements, although it flopped when repackaged as a romantic gothic, AND LOVE SURVIVED, in America in the early 1980s. He is genuinely bemused that in Britain copies of the original are now sold by dealers for £25 upwards. It is the story of Anthony Wentworth, who faints on a crowded rush-hour train and for a few moments appears to be transported back in time to the First World War. Upon awakening he discovers he has become 'possessed' by the reincarnated spirit of Harry Wentworth and the dual-personality is inexorably drawn into a web of mystery and intrigue that began many years before. It finished up with the protagonist solving his own murder, although Chetwynd-Hayes is quick to point out that the finished novel is quite different from the tale he started out to write: "The story was going to be about a man who fell in love with the daughter of a dead girl whom he also loved — he identified her as the mother. However, that wasn't how the story worked out. "When I write, I just sit down at the typewriter and type. I haven't a clue how it's going to finish. It all comes out quite naturally, without any planning on my part."

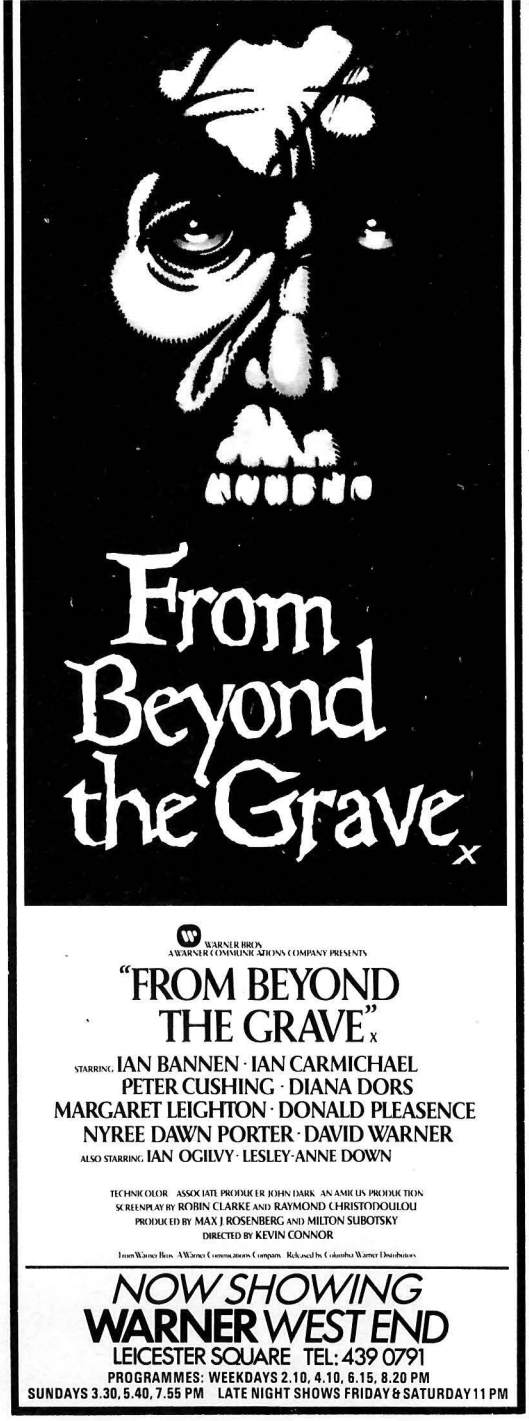
Chetwynd-Hayes also completed two other novels during this period, TWO CHEERS FOR CATHY and WORLD OF THE IMPOSSIBLE, which have yet to see the light of day and are still languishing in a bottom drawer: "In WORLD OF THE IMPOSSIBLE, I worked out a theory that the fairy stories we are taught in childhood are based on fact and they exist in another dimension. Some people from this world, armed with stainless steel armour and bren-guns, go into the next universe and discover a walled city where beautiful women are taken and tied to an altar when the dragons come down from the hills.

"A production secretary from Hammer Films described it as 'sort of James Bond meets dragons' and they were actually thinking of making it into a film. But sex started to raise its ugly head at Hammer in those days and that killed it. I think it's a lovely fantasy story . . ."

It was some years before Chetwynd-Hayes' tales finally made it onto the big screen, and in the meantime he found his niche producing short stories for *The Fontana Book of Horror Stories*, edited by Christine Barnard. In 1970, Fontana asked him to compile his own anthology entitled *Cornish Tales of Terror*, and a few years later he followed up the success of *The Unbidden* with another original collection for Tandem, *Cold Terror*, and a second anthology for Fontana, *Scottish Tales of Terror*, edited under his regular pseudonym 'Angus Campbell'. "In those days, everything to do with the supernatural sold," he remembers fondly. "At one time I had six volumes with my name on them in bookshops."

Then, at another editor's suggestion, he took over the series of *Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories*, beginning with volume nine.

"Mary Danby told me they didn't much like Robert Aickman — he was concentrat-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ing too much on the old Victorian classics. So I started editing those, until the last one — volume 20 — came out in 1984. Sales stopped. The modern age doesn't want those sort of things." He is obviously bitter when talking about the current state of horror publishing in Britain and prefers to hark back to a more atmospheric period of history, often reflected in his own fiction: "Now the Victorians were the great ghost story tellers. It was the age of ghosts, wasn't it? Gaslight, that sort of thing . . . But we haven't got it today — what with television and the electric light, the poor ghost doesn't stand a chance. I don't like this age very much — " he adds, "it's going to blow up sooner or later."

In spite of his pessimism, with disarming humour and often stark originality, Chetwynd-Hayes can still manage to skillfully revitalize an old idea into a bizarre comtemporary setting, such as in this opening sequence from 'The Elemental':

> *"'There's an elemental sitting next to you,' said the fat women in the horrible flower-patterned dress with amber beads.*
>
> *Reginald Warren lowered his newspaper, glanced at the empty seat on either side, shot an alarmed look around the carriage in general, then took refuge behind his* Evening Standard *again.*
>
> *'He's a killer,' the fat women insisted.*
>
> *Reginald frowned and tried to think rationally. How did you tackle a nutty fat women?*
>
> *'Thank you,' he said over the newspaper, 'I'm obliged.'"*

"I suppose you can have a ghost in a council flat just as well as in an old house," he says. "I've had a ghost in a tape recorder and even a haunted television — that story was done as a radio play," he adds with pride.

Although he struggles to keep his writing tuned with today's market, he freely admits that he doesn't really fit in, which is perhaps one of the reasons why he has never successfully broken into the American market:

"The Americans understand *horror,* where you hit the walnut with a big sledgehammer, but the idea of something subtle like a ghost escapes them. That's the beauty of ghost stories really, the atmosphere that gradually comes into a personality. Horror always stands a long way off. If you come face-to-face with it, it's always an anti-climax."

An archetypal R. Chetwynd-Hayes haunting appears in 'Something Comes in from the Garden'; the protagonist's first sight of the ghost is more mundane than macabre, but the author's skill lies in developing the sense of unsease without resorting to the obvious genre cliches:

John Carradine (as Chetwynd-Hayes) is introduced to the Monster Club by Vincent Price. (Note — the artwork in the background is by John Bolton.)

"It was a month to the day before the unusual happened.

The sun was setting and Robert was looking out of the window, wondering where to put his summerhouse, when the man walked across the lawn. He was tall, with a red, hooked nose, and was attired in an old, faded army overcoat. Robert watched him for a few seconds with almost dispassionate interest. The man slouched — there was no other way to describe his loose-limbed action — across Robert's line of vision, with bent shoulders and lowered head, giving the impression he was treading a familiar path."

"They tell me my books are too subtle for the American market. Pyramid did three and said, 'Our critics say you're too English' — whatever that means," Chetwynd-Hayes smiles. He says he "never really understood" the stories of H.P. Lovecraft, describing them as "heavy going", but readily admits to a passing fondness for Stephen King's work:

"I've read all his stuff now, and some of it I didn't like. I didn't like THE SHINING, but the later ones, like FIRESTARTER, I thought were ingenious. CHRISTINE was also clever, and I found CUJO quite enthralling. But when I met him, I said, 'You've only got one plot, haven't you?' and he replied, 'You've found me out . . .'"

Chetwynd-Hayes' own forays into fully-fledged horror have been less successful: "I had a couple of stories in Bertie (Herbert) van Thal's PAN BOOK OF HORROR STORIES. In one of them I had these people on the moors who would capture people when they wanted an arm, they would amputate it, cook it and eat it. Then they would come back for another limb and so on — you can carry on for a long time doing that. Pan loved it and wanted me to do some more, but I told them, 'No, I can't do any more like that.' I just proved to myself that I could write it."

The author most enjoys writing for younger readers: In 1976 he ghost-edited and wrote almost all of GHOUL, a one-shot magazine from New English Library, billed a 'a ghastly giggle'. He also edited a very successful and highly entertaining series of juvenile anthologies, the ARMADA MONSTER BOOKS, as he recalls: "I wrote to Armada at the time and said, 'there are too many books about giants and dragons — it's about time we had some new monsters.' The series was finally killed because the monsters were too tame for children today . . ."

More adult collection of his work appeared throughout the 1970s: TERROR BY NIGHT (1974), THE ELEMENTAL (1974), THE NIGHT GHOULS (1975), THE MONSTER CLUB (1975), TALES OF FEAR AND FANTASY (1977), THE CRADLE DEMON (1978; "I still think it's the best") and THE FANTASTIC WORLD OF KAMTELLAR (1980). He also continued to edit anthologies for Fontana ("I had a lovely time researching those"); these included WELSH TALES OF TERROR (1973), TALES OF TERROR FROM OUTER SPACE (1975), GASLIGHT TALES OF TERROR (1976) and DOOMED TO THE NIGHT (1978).

"I began writing supernatural fiction because it was the only genre I could break into," admits Chetwynd-Hayes. "I could turn them out and everybody accepted them." One of the reasons he still enjoys writing about the macabre is his curiosity about what lies beyond death — he would like to believe that there is an afterlife, but he doubts it.

R. Chetwynd-Hayes' brief skirmish with the movies (neither of them came off well) has left him with two screen credits, a couple of options and a pair of novelisations. In 1972, while still selling furniture in Berkeley Street, he was approached by Amicus Productions, who wanted to turn a number of his stories into a television series. "Just at that moment," he recalls, "we'd been taken over and I'd got the sack, so it was marvellous. I became a freelance writer on the strength of it. But it terrified me — I suddenly realised I had to live on my own wits, but it worked out." He has never regretted the decision: "I was doing something I wanted to do — look at the books I turned out as a result of that."

Would-be director Kevin Connor had been flying to America when he picked up a copy of THE UNBIDDEN from an airport bookstall. Upon his return, he interested Amicus producer Milton Subotsky in filming Chetwynd-Hayes' stories. "Seventeen stories were scripted," reveals the author, "drawn from three of my collections: THE UNBIDDEN, COLD TERROR and THE ELEMENTAL. Alas, the television series never materialised, but Milton chose four stories, *The Gate Crasher, The Elemental, An Act of Kindness* and *The Door,* which, when linked together, eventually became the film FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE" (1973, aka THE CREATURES FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE).

Following the successful anthology format first introduced by Amicus back in 1965 with *Dr. Terror's House of Horrors,* the film starred Peter Cushing as the mysterious proprietor of an old antique shop called 'Temptations Limited', who delivers a gruesome surprise with every purchase.

"Needless to say, I was delighted with the all-star cast and could scarcely believe that such famous names were actually going to give life to characters I had created —

"I've read all his stuff now, and some of it I didn't like. I didn't like THE SHINING, but the later ones, like FIRESTARTER, I thought were ingenious. CHRISTINE was also clever, and I found CUJO quite enthralling. But when I met him, I said, 'You've only got one plot, haven't you?' and he replied, 'You've found me out . . .'"

Peter Cushing, FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE.

in the most part — in the small hours that seperate midnight from sunrise," enthuses the writer. "The film itself is a visual experience. That is to say, like most Amicus productions, there is very little dialogue and the plot depends mainly on informative actions, much like the old silent films. This is particularly effective when Donald Pleasence and his daughter Angela give meaningful looks out of ice-diamond eyes and undoubtedly make *An Act of Kindness* the most terrifying story in the entire film.

"I think perhaps *The Gatecrasher* could have been improved by a little more conversation from David Warner, as the point that I tried to make in the story — namely that the face in the mirror was the shade of Jack the Ripper — was completely lost." With a strong cast that included Margaret Leighton, Ian Carmichael, Ian Ogilvy, Diana Dors and Lesley-Anne Down, and an impressive directing debut by Kevin Conner, the film deserved to do well, but failed at the boxoffice. Chetwynd-Hayes admits that he was "bitterly disappointed" when he first saw the film, but adds "When I saw it again on television, it seemed somehow to look very much better."

To coincide with the film's release, Fontana published a tie-in edition of THE ELEMENTA, but as Chetwynd-Hayes explains, there were a few legal problems to be sorted out: "There was a big fight between Tandem and Fontana about who was going to bring it out. Bertie van Thal got me into that mess: 'Don't worry', he said, 'I'm your agent, I'll handle this for you'. Then he dropped me in it and said, 'It's nothing to do with me'. The book finally came out from Fontana and Tandem brought one out at the same time as 'by the author of FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE — that's how they got over it."

On the strength of that initial contact with Amicus, Milton Subotsky asked Chetwynd-Hayes to write the novelisation of DOMINIQUE (1978, aka DOMINIQUE IS DEAD. Published as a Universal paperback, the book was based on a script by Edward and Valerie Abraham which in turn was based on a short story by Harold Lawlor, 'What Beckoning Ghost?', published in the July 1948 *Weird Tales.*

A psychological thriller with supernatural overtones, the film starred Cliff Robertson as a scheming husband trying to drive his wife (played by Jean Simmons) insane.

"We went to see it being filmed at Shepperton Studios," recalls Chetwynd-Hayes, "and I said, 'Milton, they'll never forgive you for what you've done here: you've got a ghost, and then you explain it away. But there is an answer — when it has all been explained, that door opens and out comes Dominique holding a rope, slithering towards the person who killed her.'

"Milton thought that it was a marvellous idea, but it was too late — the sets had apparently already been knocked down."

While he was writing DOMINIQUE, Chetwynd-Hayes was also approached to write the novelisation for DAMIEN: OMEN II, but regrets that he had to turn it down: "They wanted that in a fortnight; it's a shame, they were going to pay me $8,000 . . . " However, he did get the opportunity to write another novelisation in 1980, when he adapted THE AWAKENING for Magnum Books. Unaware that it was based on Bram Stoker's short novel *The Jewel of the Seven Stars* ("the only thing I'd read by him was *Dracula*") and, like the film-makers, ignorant of the 1971 Hammer version filmed as BLOOD FROM THE MUMMY'S TOMB, the author was given just two weeks to write the book.

"It was marvellous, I got £2,000 for that. I read the script and pinched a bit from H. Rider Haggard, some from the Arabian Nights, and got a story out of it somehow. I found it was ridiculously easy. I also saw the film all by myself and thought it was stupid — why didn't they find an original idea? Anyway, it flopped, so I think I was right. I only found our afterwards it was based on Stoker's book because Arrow's original edition was selling better than my version," he adds. "However, my book sold 15,000 copies, so Magnum was pleased."

"The Americans understand* horror, *where you hit the walnut with a big sledgehammer, but the idea of something subtle like a ghost escapes them. That's the beauty of ghost stories really, the atmosphere that gradually comes into a personality. Horror always stands a long way off. If you come face-to-face with it, it's always an anti-climax."

If Chetwynd-Hayes was unhappy with *From Beyond the Grave,* he was even more disappointed by *The Monster Club* (1980), once again produced by Milton Subotsky.

First published in 1975, THE MONSTER CLUB is a collection of connected tales featuring a dazzling and original array of monstrous creatures, as the author points out in his introductory note:

"I would like to stress that the Monstreal Table is only intended as a rough guide to the breeding habits of modern monsters. Interbreeding between primates, secondaries and hybrids is not common, but not unknown. For example, if a shadmock *should mate with a* vampire, *their issue will be known as a* shadvam. *A* mock *to a* ghoul *would produce a* mocgoo, *and so on.*

In the third story I have crossed a ghoul *with a* human *- or in monstreal parlance, a* hume *- and begat a* humgoo.

Doubtless if the serious student of monstrumology keeps his eyes open, he will dis-

cover many strange mixtures walking about in out public places or strap-hanging in the Underground."

R. Chetwynd-Hayes readily admits that he likes to "sit down and think up new monsters," and in case you were wondering what these creatures get up to, he thoughtfully included 'The basic rules of Monsterdom' in the same book:

"Vampires — sup; Werewolves — hunt; Ghouls — tear; Shaddies — lick; Maddies — yawn; Mocks — blow; Shadmocks — only whistle."

The author had asked New English Library for the rights to THE MONSTER CLUB back, which they agreed to return. Then when Subotsky's Sword & Sorcery Productions announced it would be making a film of the book, the publisher wrote to Chetwynd-Hayes informing him that he would be delighted to hear that they were reissuing THE MONSTER CLUB to tie in with the film. "I wrote back and said, 'Oh no you're not. You're going to give me a new contract and I want £4,000 advance . . . ' and after a while they finally gave in." Another all-star multi-story movie, with added rock music and humour for children, THE MONSTER CLUB did not do well at the box office and was released directly to television in America. Chetwynd-Hayes believes he knows why the film was not successful: "They could have made it much funnier," he says. "There was no control over the adaptation." Scripted by Edward and Valerie Abraham, Chetwynd-Hayes blames Subotsky for telling them what to write: "He hates dialogue; mind you, he did me proud — look at the publicity he gave me."

While filming was in progress, the author visited the set and met stars Vincent Price and John Carradine — the latter portraying Chetwynd-Hayes himself in the linking story. "That was Milton's idea of a joke," reveals the author, "because I had put him into the books as Lintom Busotsky, an anagram of his name."

Another of his books, THE DARK MAN, was optioned for filming in 1964, but after 26 years still nothing has happened. As he explains: "A film producer took me to lunch and offered me £250 for the option — I thought 'Good Lord, my fortune's made!" He said he'd need about half-a-million pounds to make the film, Dirk Bogarde would play Wentworth and who did I want as the female lead? So I suggested Mia Farrow and he agreed. Then nothing happened. He paid his option for a year, then he renewed it, then he renewed it again and then he dropped it. After THE MONSTER CLUB came out, he started again and gave me three-month options; that went on for a couple of years . . . When I last spoke to him he said he still hadn't given up."

In THE DARK MAN Chetwynd-Hayes first introduced readers to the haunted mansion Clavering Grance; since then he has written more than half-a-dozen other books (the most recent being the novel, THE HAUNTED GRANGE (1988) about the building or the tainted ground on which it stands, spanning the centuries from Elizabethan times into the far future. His dream now is for a producer to film THE CLAVERING CHRONICLES: "We can work our way through the centuries then," he points out. "It would run for a long time."

Following his first hardcover from William Kimber, THE CRADLE DEMON, Chetwynd-Hayes returned to the publisher the following year with a science fiction novel, THE BRATS (1979). "I couldn't write science fiction now," he confesses. "They've got all sorts of complicated stuff." He prefers the Edgar Rice Burroughs school of SF/adventure, which he sees as good, uncomplicated fantasy. Although he would like to write a lost world-type yarn himself, he sadly admits there would be no market for it today. Kimber followed THE BRATS with another novel, THE PARTAKER (1980), then a string of short story collections: TALES OF DARKNESS (1981;

"The first public acknowledgements of Chetwynd-Hayes' long standing in the horror field came in 1989 when he won both the Horror Writers of America and The British Fantasy Life Achievement awards for his services to the genre."

Chetwynd-Hayes' two main contributions to horror literature in in this still from THE MONSTER CLUB — a monster and a touch of humour.

"There is something warmly reassuring about the fantasy fiction of R. Chetwynd-Hayes. It is not simply that, almost singlehandedly, he is keeping alive the tradition of the typically British ghost story (which indeed he is), but when you dip into one of his collections you are transported back to a more genteel period of fantastic literature."

"That sold best, everyone likes that"), TALES FROM BEYOND (1982), TALES FROM THE OTHER SIDE (1983), A QUIVER OF GHOSTS (1984), TALES FROM THE DARK LANDS (1984), GHOSTS FROM THE MIST OF TIME (1985), TALES FROM THE SHADOWS (1986), TALES FROM THE HAUNTED HOUSE (1986), DRACULA'S CHILDREN (1987), THE HOUSE OF DRACULA (1987) and TALES OF THE HIDDEN WORLD (1988).

Chetwynd-Hayes' stories have been adapted for films, television and radio; he has been published in Britain, America, Scandinavia and Europe (although in Germany they have managed to mistakenly credit him as both Robert W. Chambers and Robert Chetwynd-Hayes!) but, perhaps not too surprisingly, he is rather dismissive about fame: "I don't think I have a reputation — who's ever heard of me?" he asks.

The first public acknowledgements of Chetwynd-Hayes' long standing in the horror field came in 1989 when he won both the Horror Writers of America and The British Fantasy Life Achievement awards for his services to the genre. The former gave the author his very first trip across the Atlantic, an experience that made almost as much of an impression on him as the accolades of his peers. He recalls: "I actually felt the trip across to be excessively boring, because I'd expected to be able to see the sea and all I could see were clouds! I'd even booked a window seat, but all that meant was that I had to climb over two other people every time I wanted to get out. But once I arrived in New York and my agent Cherry Weiner collected me, things improved. Everyone was excessively kind to me and I thought New York quite a city." However, when he found out he had to give a speech at the awards ceremony, he admits he was a bit worried: "I made sure I didn't drink anything! I gave my little chat and that seemed to go down quite well, then I collected my award — a lovely thing. But the real point is that I couldn't believe it when they invited me over to the HWA meeting: I though, 'Why me?' It was a very great honour. Of course, I wondered, when they said it was for Lifetime Achievement, whether they meant 'well, it's time to wind up now'; but I said, 'as I'm only 35, the best thing to do is to call it half a lifetime achievement and I'd come back in 35 years' time to pick up another one!'"

A few months later it was the annual British Fantasy Convention, and Chetwynd-Hayes received a phone call from Brian Lumley: "He said, 'You will be there, won't you? I shall want you to talk to some friends of mine.' Well, I thought that sounded a little suspicious, but I really didn't think much about it. So there I was, sitting next to Guy Smith and Brian (who was Master of Ceremonies at that year's convention) started announcing the award. He was muttering away and Guy turned to me and said, 'I believe he's talking about you.' I said, 'No, he can't be!' Then I listened a bit more, and he was! So I had to jump up and get another one — and they're both on my mantlepiece as we speak. I've been in this game so many years and to get two awards — my first two awards — in one year was unbelievable. In fact, they were the only good things that happened."

The last couple of years have not proved to be an unmitigated success for the author. Thanks to Kimber, Chetwynd-Hayes was building a solid library following in Britain when, hard on the heels of a two-book contract, came the publisher's sudden and unexpected dissolution, followed by a major hiatus in his recently revitalised American career.

"Kimber, my publisher for so many years, was marvellous — I never really had time to think about going to anybody else — as soon as one book was finished, they always sent me a commission and an advance for the next. Then they sold out to Thorsons, but that was alright. They gave me a commission for two books and I turned them out. I got the proofs back for CURSE OF THE SNAKE GOD, corrected them, and all was going fine until I got a call from Amy Myers, my editor, who said 'Ronald, dreadful news: Thorsons has been bought by Collins and they've cancelled your contract.' But I'm just now beginning to recover from some of that damage, because Judy Piatkus has bought that book, and as soon as that contract comes through, I shall giver her a synopsis of the second, SHIVERS AND SHUDDERS, and hope she goes for that too. I used to do very well in libraries: I have 18 books available and I normally get around £1,000 a year from the public lending rate, so obviously a lot of people read me still. I keep talking about trying to move into the 'Stephen King market' — one of those colossal books — but I never get the time to start on it. I'd do anything that paid the biggest money.

"As far as America is concerned, it's a strange situation. Tor bought two books, THE GRANGE (THE KING'S GHOST (1985) as it was called in Britain) and THE OTHER SIDE, and it looked as if they weren't selling very well at all. Then suddenly, at the beginning of May this year, I got a cheque through the post for American royalties over and above my advance. They weren't my first sales in America — that was my

novel, THE DARK MAN, but they were my first in recent years. I've just heard that Zebra is going to reissue THE DARK MAN (as AND LOVE SURVIVED), but I don't get a penny as I'm still working off the unearned advance from last time around!"

Meanwhile, back in Britain, BBC Enterprises recently reissued a series of radio shows, THE PRICE OF FEAR, narrated by Vincent Price, on cassette; one of Chetwynd-Hayes' stories. *The Night Removal*, is featured. "I couldn't find anyone who had it," he explains, "so I had to go into the bowels of the BBC in London and get someone to play it to me. I'm hoping that will stimulate some interest in me too."

Ronald Chetwynd-Hayes is slowing down as a writer and admits it's sometimes hard going, but he also thinks that his more recent work is "not half bad". He also considers himself lazy: "Writing a novel is far simpler than writing a collection of short stories — you've only got one plot. Edgar Wallace said, 'A novel is a lazy man's short story — any writer worth his salt can write a novel in a weekend'". When the author is pressed on how long he takes to write a novel, he replies with a smile, "A little longer than a weekend . . ."

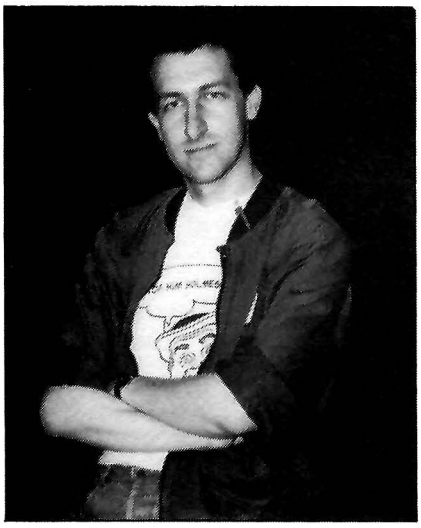
He likes to believe that he is writing for posterity, but then admits that "It's only a dream — I'll be forgotten . . . There's a story in GHOSTS FROM THE MIST OF TIME where an author stumbles and falls, gets up and he's someone else 200 years hence.

The Carradine/Price double act — the only reason to see THE MONSTER CLUB.

There he finds his works have been turned into a new Bible, a religion has been based on his fiction . . .

"That must be the dream of everyone who writes, mustn't it? I like to think I write for the future: There's just a chance, with hardbacks of short stories, that in a hundred years' time someone putting an anthology together will find one of my old stories on a bookstall and slip it in because there are no copyright problems . . . I shall never know whether it happens ot not — or perhaps I will . . . ? The truth is I don't really know what the future holds for me. It was all looking pretty miserable a few months ago, but now Judy Piatkus has bought up CURSE OF THE SNAKE GOD and the Tor books are obviously selling through, albeit slowly, and that gives my agent more power to her elbow. I'd like to get another American publisher, as Tor has such a tremendous backlog that they are not taking any more books on.

"At least now I've got some hope again, with a new British publisher and proof of some US sales, however small. I'll just keep churning the books out like I always have, and hope they fill a vacuum somewhere. I think I have to write, even if nobody published it now. It's my life."



Andy Lane has been a regular contributor to *Starburst*, the late *Fantasy Zone* and numerous *Doctor Who* publications. Here he visits the set of Stephen Gallagher's TV series, CHIMERA.

Pandora's BOX

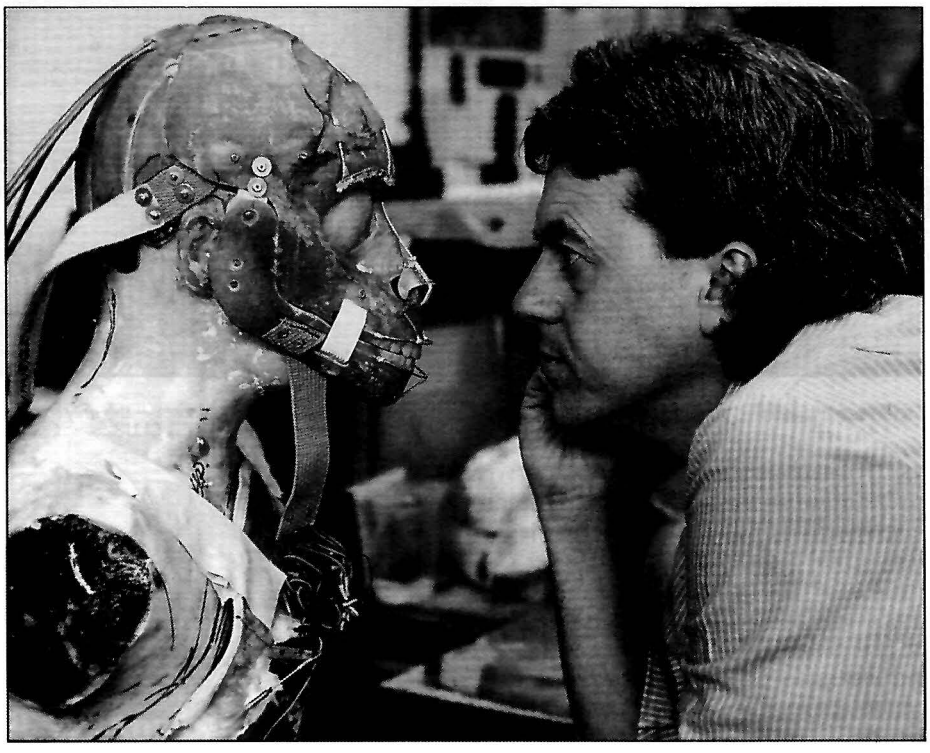
It's late in the evening at the nurses' college just outside London. Flames are licking from the windows. A girl runs out, her face and hands covered in soot, her eyes streaming. She looks around for her colleagues. Smoke from the fire billows around her, obscuring the landscape, but surely she can't be the only one who escaped? And then a momentary gust of wind clears a corridor between her and the building, and she sees them. They've been messily hacked to death and neatly lined up against the wall. And behind her, something emerges from the smoke . . .

Fortunately it's not a glimpse of Conservative plans for the National Health Service, but a scene from CHIMERA, a new television mini-series written by Stephen Gallagher and produced by Zenith for broadcast on ITV during August. Based on Gallagher's first mainstream novel, published back in 1982, CHIMERA is a contemporary horror story a 'stalk and slash' thriller with some depth and intelligence somewhere beneath the drama.

On the evening that SKELETON CREW talked to the cast of CHIMERA, Lawrence Gordon Clark (perhaps best known for directing the thriller HARRY'S GAME) was filming the scenes where Chad, the artificially made creature at the centre of the plot, escapes from the scientific establishment in which he has been kept and takes his revenge on his creator, Doctor Jenner, and the rest of the staff at the clinic. Shooting started that evening at sundown, with the intention being to work through until sunrise the next morning. Ten hours filming and Nick Gillott the producer of CHIMERA only expected to get about three minutes of screen time out of it probably indicates something of the air of boredom that hangs around any film set.

During the long wait for something mildly exciting to happen, writer Steve Gallagher spoke of the background to the series. "It's actually eleven years old," Gallagher says "I started it in '79. I can trace the idea of it back to a book I read which suggested that by the year 2025 man-animal hybrids would be in routine industrial production. I was also reading things on animal rights at around the same time, with an idea for doing a story based in that area. And I thought, well, if you put these two together, what do you get? You get a man-animal hybrid which actually blurs the distinction between human and the animal."

Stephen Gallagher and Chad 'ape' Mel and Griff.



Given that CHIMERA concerns the implications of animal experimentation and genetic engineering, it's possible that the viewing audience might pick up on the story as being thinly disguised manifesto against such experiments.

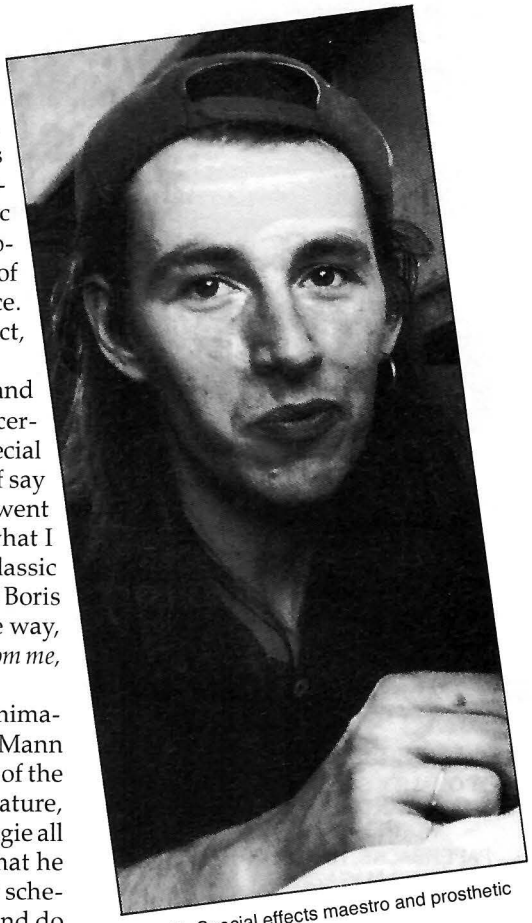
"I will be the first up against the barricades to decry them if they do", says Gallagher, "because I'm in favour of embryo research; I'm in favour of the whole fertility field. What concerns me is that these guys are setting the pace and creating technology and along behind them are going to come this army of 'me too' researchers. It's the 'me too' researcher who, I think, is the dangerous guy here. Jenner in this story is one of the 'me too' guys; he's a second rate scientist with access to the first rate technology created by others. He does what he does because it's sexy, and for no other reason."

"There's a kind of warning within the piece . . ."

Actor David Calder (better known to genre groupies as the irascible Nathan Spring from the BBC's futuristic police show STAR COPS), plays Doctor Jenner, Chad's creator. Calder has similar views on the character of Jenner. "Well, he's an amoral geneticist who's really just usurped someone else's research and, with the connivance of the state, is going to put it into practice. He's a character who hasn't really asked the questions about genetic research. He's quite happy to go along with it and make his millions. These people are not into crime and murder, but they *are* into bending the natural rules of society to exploit new knowledge. There's a kind of warning within the piece. Genetic research should and must, I think, go ahead, but under very, very strict, controlled conditions. This is a piece that shows why."

Despite strong performances from David Calder, John (CAL) Lynch and Kenneth (HELLBOUND) Cranham, the centrepiece of CHIMERA will almost certainly be Chad himself. Although he was created by Image Animation, the special effects company behind Clive Barker's films, Steve Gallagher had a great deal of say in the look of the creature. As he explains "Before preproduction really started I went down to Image Animation and produced some sketches and a manifesto of what I thought a perfect monster should be, making a point that if you think back to classic monsters of cinema history, like the beast in LA BELLE ET LE BETE, like the Boris Karloff Frankenstein creation, what you have is a creature that is, in a macabre way, beautiful. It seems to me that the second rate, failed monster says, *Look away from me, I'm ugly*, whereas the true monster says *Dare to look at me, I'm beautiful*".

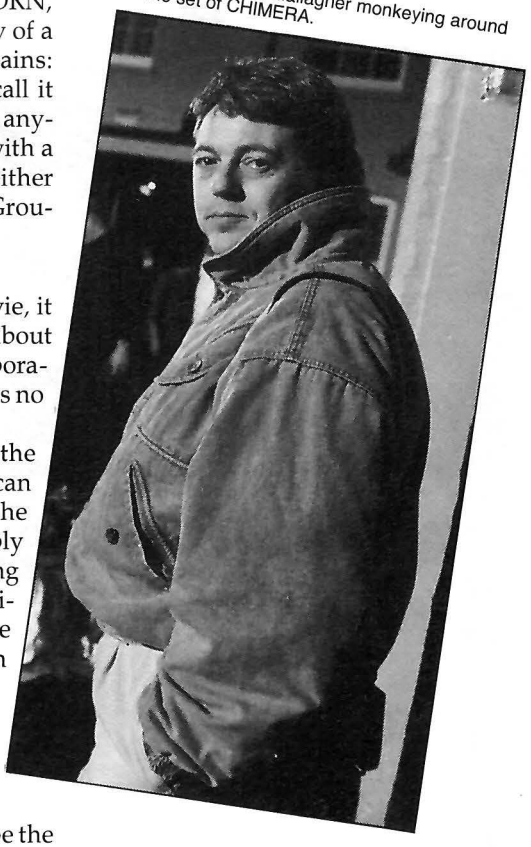
Chad is a combination of an actor in a suit and a complex mask which uses animatronic effects to bring expressions to life. The early involvement of actor Dougie Mann (who had previously played a primate in GREYSTOKE) was vital to the success of the project. As Image Animation's Littlejohn, who designed and built the creature, explains. "To make Chad we did something which is quite unusual. We cast Dougie all in one, so that his body was cast at the same time as his head, which meant that he was covered in plaster. All he had free was his nostrils!" Then it was a very tight schedule of nine weeks to get it all together. "It's all a bit quick. We're going to try and do the best we possibly can in the time given."



ABOVE: Special effects maestro and prosthetic breast wearer Littlejohn.

Once the actor had been chosen and the suit built, primate expert Peter Elliott was brought in to advise on how half-human, half-ape creatures would move, behave and react under certain circumstances. Elliott, no stranger to apes — and to men pretending to be apes — after his involvement with such films as GREYSTOKE and GORILLAS IN THE MIST, brought with him his experiences on the BBC's FIRST BORN, which (despite the fact that Gallagher's book was published first) got the story of a similar simian/human crossbreed on the screen first (and worst). Elliott explains: "Basically I don't do it by mime techniques, I see it as an acting problem. I call it 'method chimping'. It's taking method acting into costume work. It applies to anything, whether it's a monster, an alien or a realistic animal. The area we're in, with a bipedal, slightly freaky, genetically-altered person, is very dodgy because it's neither one thing nor the other. You can so easily end up with something that looks like Groucho Marx."

BELOW: Stephen Gallagher monkeying around on the set of CHIMERA.



Although CHIMERA has all the elements of a typical 'stalk-and-slash' movie, it also has a solid grounding in the thriller genre, and a moral ambiguity about whether Chad has the right to be treated as human, or as a dangerous laboratory animal. Steve Gallagher is aware of the grey areas in the script, but has no doubts about which side of the barricades he would stand.

"I have a reading of CHIMERA in which I see Chad as the tragic hero of the piece," he says. "Making Chad mute in a way makes him an enigma and you can read anything you want into an enigma. He's been made deliberately mute, in the same way that dogs are deliberately devocalized in laboratory experiments simply as a matter of research convenience, *just to keep them quiet. My* reason for making him mute was because I found it easier to make him credible that way. I also particularly didn't want to use too much of the model of Frankenstein and have the creature completely articulate, justifying itself, having a philosophical position on itself. Chad expresses his philosophical position with a butcher's knife."

Despite the tight schedule, the rush, the waiting around and the amount of work which had yet to be done, everyone on the set of CHIMERA seems committed to Steve Gallagher's original vision. Image Animation's Littlejohn sums it up best of all when he says, "to be involved with a writer like Steve, who has got this idea of a creature in his mind, and then to make it come alive, has got to be the best thing in the world."

With thanks to Archie Tait and Fliss Coombs

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NECROFILE

In another of our regular articles on fan events, organisations and publications, Matthew Pook looks at one of the many Science Fiction fanzines on the market.

Cerebretron

There are many Science Fiction fanzines around, and CEREBRETRON is neither the best, nor the best-selling, nor the longest-established. It is, however, one of the few that regularly carry features for SF roleplayers, and it does have an impressive record as far as issue-by-issue improvement goes.

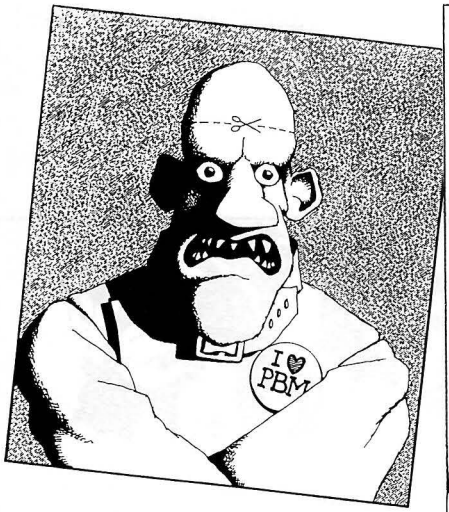
The first A5-size issue was decanted from the mind of editor/publisher Alex Bardy in 1986. It was 38 pages long, rather poorly printed and had a very small circulation, sold mainly through advertisements in other fanzines (including SKELETON CREW 1/2). By June 1990 it had evolved impressively into a 54-page, A4 magazine with glossy covers and an interesting contributors list. Covering most aspects of serious SF, and publishing SF fiction, poetry and opinion, CEREBRETRON's original objectives were a lot different.

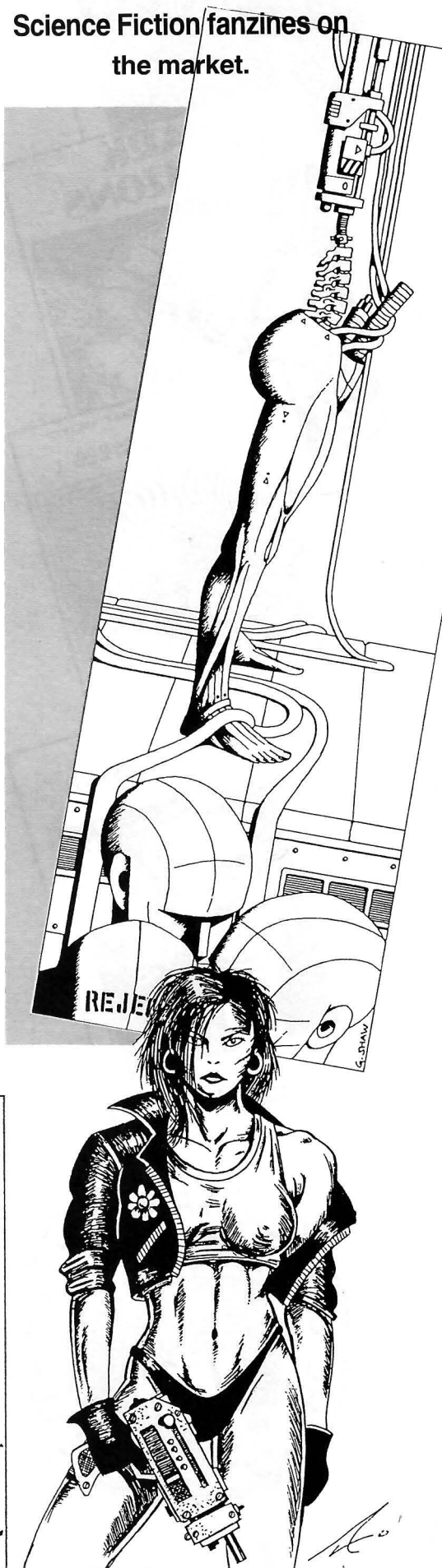
Bardy initially intended for CEREBRETRON to join the many existing amateur magazines for fans of DOCTOR WHO, except that his fanzine would concentrate chiefly on the then newly-released DOCTOR WHO roleplaying game (indeed, the name CEREBRETRON was lifted from one of the early DWRPG scenarios). CB9 had a definite DOCTOR WHO bias, but from the responses both from readers and potential contributors, Bardy realised that the way forward was to turn CEREBRETRON into an all-round Science Fiction fanzine, drawing in new and interesting writers from the SF, horror and dark fantasy genres; past contributors have included SKELETON CREW veterans Brian Lumley, Peter F Jeffrey and D.F.Lewis.

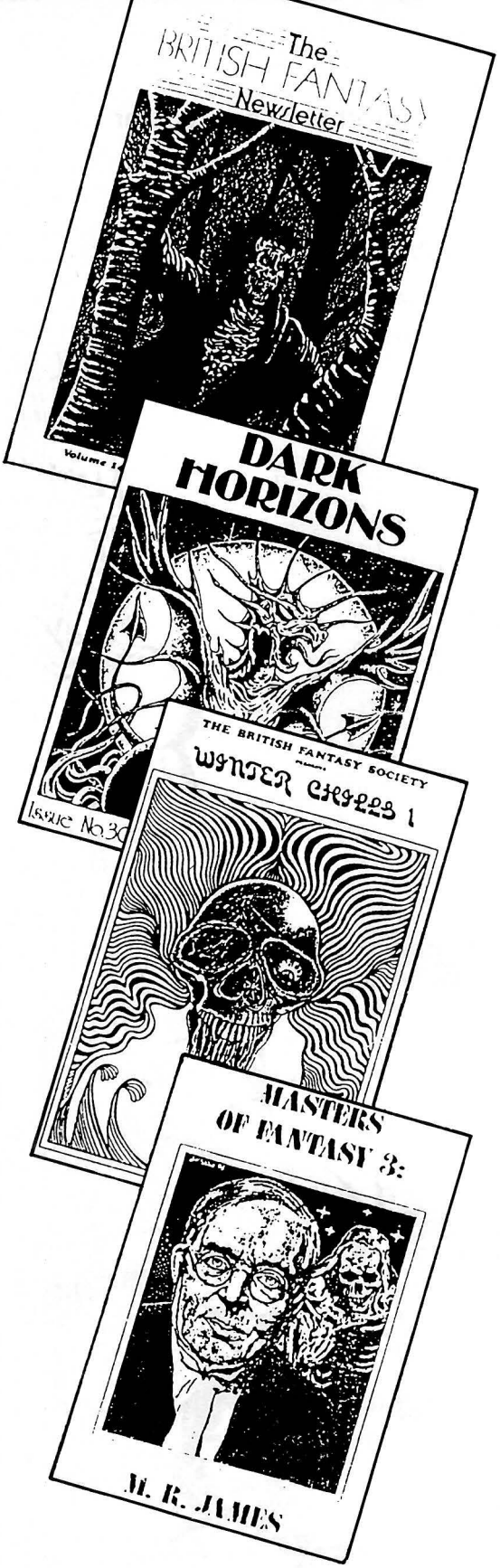
Whilst still primarily a Science Fiction roleplaying fanzine, CEREBRETRON explores as many avenues of SF as possible. CB# (priced at £1.30) contained seven very readable pages of letters (the basis for many fanzines), roleplaying reviews, a lot of short fiction plus articles on Cyberpunk and — pick of the issue — 'Science-Horror' (a new one on me!). Past issues have featured roleplaying scenarios and articles, SF concepts and their application, time travel, H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos in SF (and *vice versa*), diseases, flora, robotics . . . the list goes on.

Bardy admits that the magazine has begun to take on a more hard— SF/'Dark Future' approach, and promises more roleplaying hardware and more of the excellent opinion/articles by the likes of Steve Hatherley, Peter F Jeffrey and Mark Samuels that make CEREBRETRON such a thought-provoking fanzine. Some of Bardy's editorial space can be a little embarrasingly uninformed, but his personality (which comes across every issue through the editorial, the letters pages and the occasional space-filler) makes up for it.

With "the big one-zero" (as he puts it) due out any day, now is probably a good time to send a sample £1.50 to Mr Bardy at 28 Gladsmuir Road, London N19 3JX. Good quality contributions are also invited, but Bardy warns that all unsolicited material is subject to his *Benji Hayozaki Electromagnetic Waffle Incinerator*. So *that's* his secret . . .







Last Writes

The fantasy world is a strange one, not least because of the enthusiasm it generates in its devotees. Once it grips you (usually in a painful part of the anatomy) you're a lost cause. Your house fills up with books and then, suddenly, you descend to a whole new level of activity. Most of it is supported by magazines like this, precisely because a magazine like this is the next obvious place to go.

After that, it's on to the specialist bookshops, the back issues, the fanzines, the contacts and letters, until at last there's only one place left to go. The convention.

Why? Because reading horror fiction and watching horror films leads you inexorably into wanting to talk about them, to know more about them and about their creators. And the convention is the place to meet them. In fact, there is only one convention in the British horror fan's diary — Fantasycon, held every September, (usually) in Birmingham.

There are others, of course. The World Fantasy Convention, for one. But Fantasycon scores again and again because it's where the professionals want to go. So if you'd like to meet Ramsey Campbell, have a drink with the two Stephens (Gallagher and Laws), discuss drive-in movies with Joe Lansdale or small town America with Charlie Grant, relive great moments of the silver screen with Kim Newman or Chris Fowler, then think again about a trip to Birmingham — the Midland Hotel, 14-6 September.

The convention will be small, but perhaps that's the key — it'll also be informal and friendly. A list of attendees, however, always reads like a who's who in the fantasy field — Brian Lumley, Karl Edward Wagner, James Herbert, Clive Barker, Ian Watson, Ron Chetwynd-Hayes, Guy N Smith are just of few of the names who attend regularly, returning year after year.

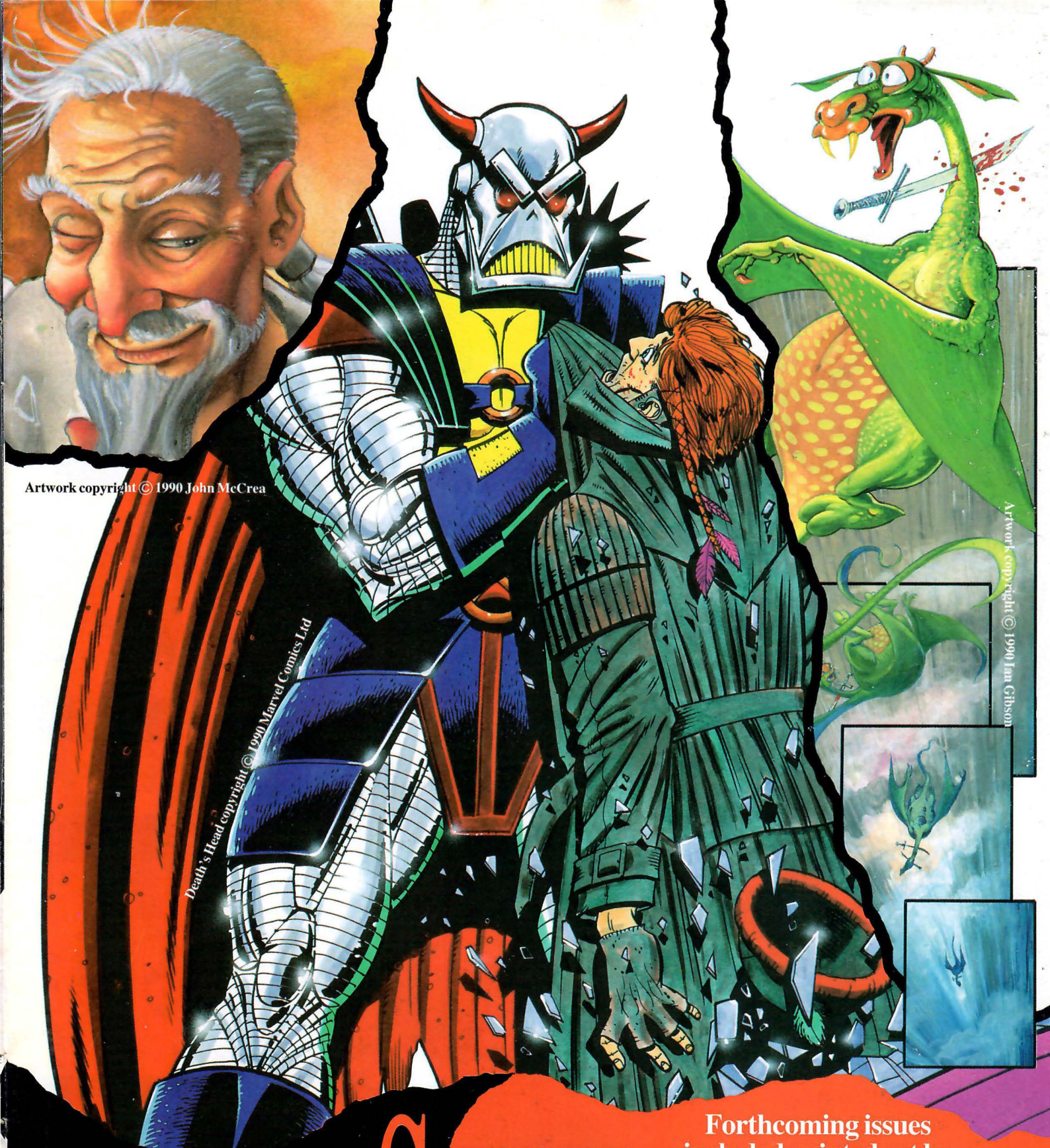
So, what's the attraction?

Apart from the bars open until the early hours? It could be the relaxed atmosphere, the panel discussions, the book signings, the author readings, the films, the dealer room, the fabulous fantasy raffle and more and more. This year, the Guests of Honour are Joe R Lansdale and Stephen Gallagher, with Stephen Laws as Master of Ceremonies.

However, this year, there's a special incentive to SKELETON CREW readers to attend — apart from the potentially amusing sight of the editors of this magazine and FEAR trying hard not to buy each other a drink. The cost of attending the convention (hotel rooms extra, of course) is just £14 (£12 to BFS members); but the first five SC readers to mention this column will get half price attendance. And, because we're really kind people here, a mention in the next issue.

Details from Fantasycon, 15 Stanley Road, Morden, Surrey SM4 5DE. That's also the contact address for the British Fantasy Society, an excellent collection of fantasy devotees who issue regular news and fiction magazines, as well as occasional art folios. A regular series of meetings in London has attracted Steve King and Peter Straub before now and, although those two authors aren't members, the following (and the convention attendees above) are: Dean R Koontz, Gene Wolfe, Steve Rasnic Tem, Neil Gaiman, Brian Stableford, Storm Constantine, Peter Atkins, Milton Subotsky and your SKELETON CREW editor, who traces his fantasy editing career back to two years editing the BFS NEWSLETTER.

See you at Fantasycon? Of course.



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